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THE NEW REPUBLIC

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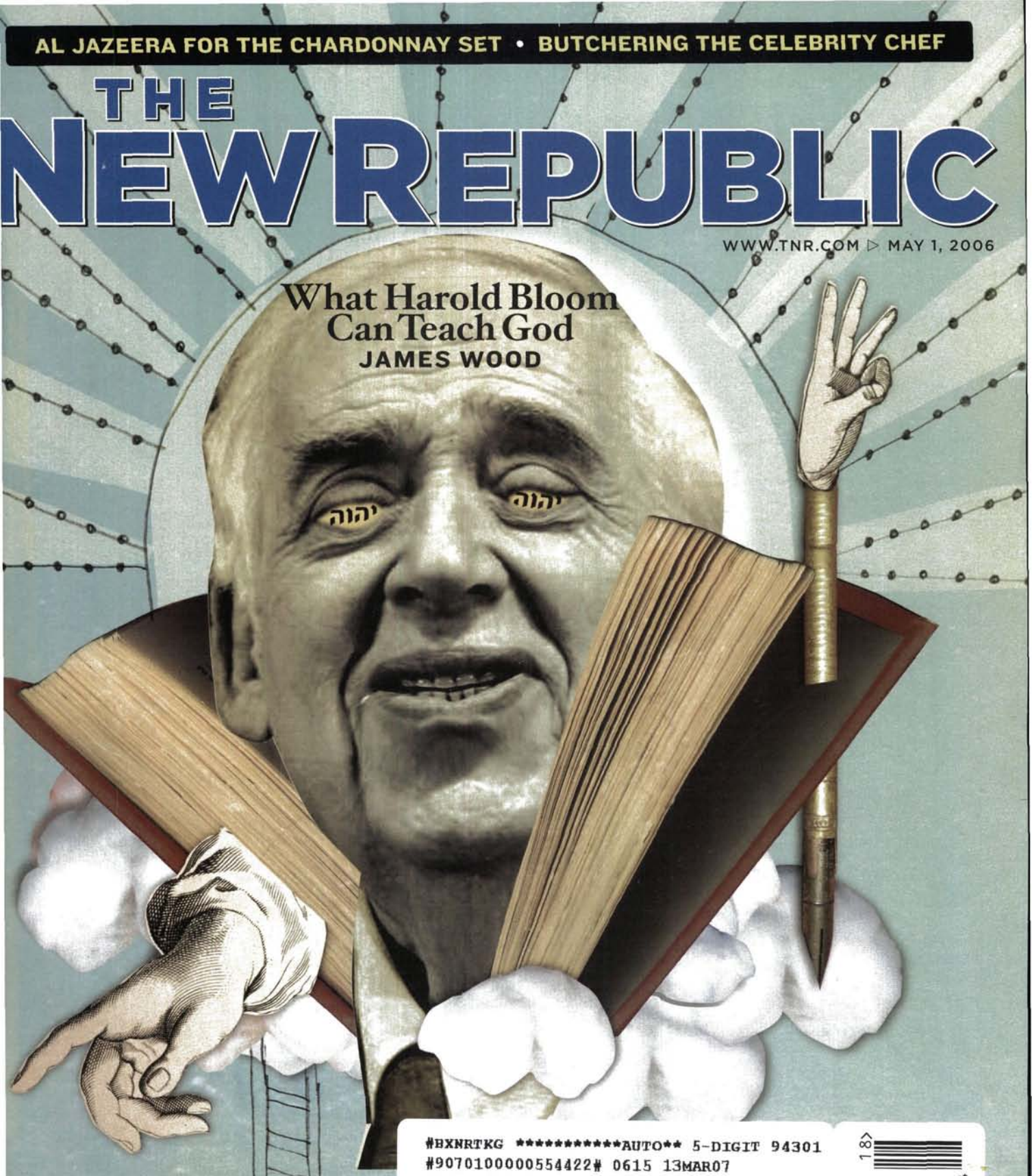
What Harold Bloom Can Teach God

JAMES WOOD



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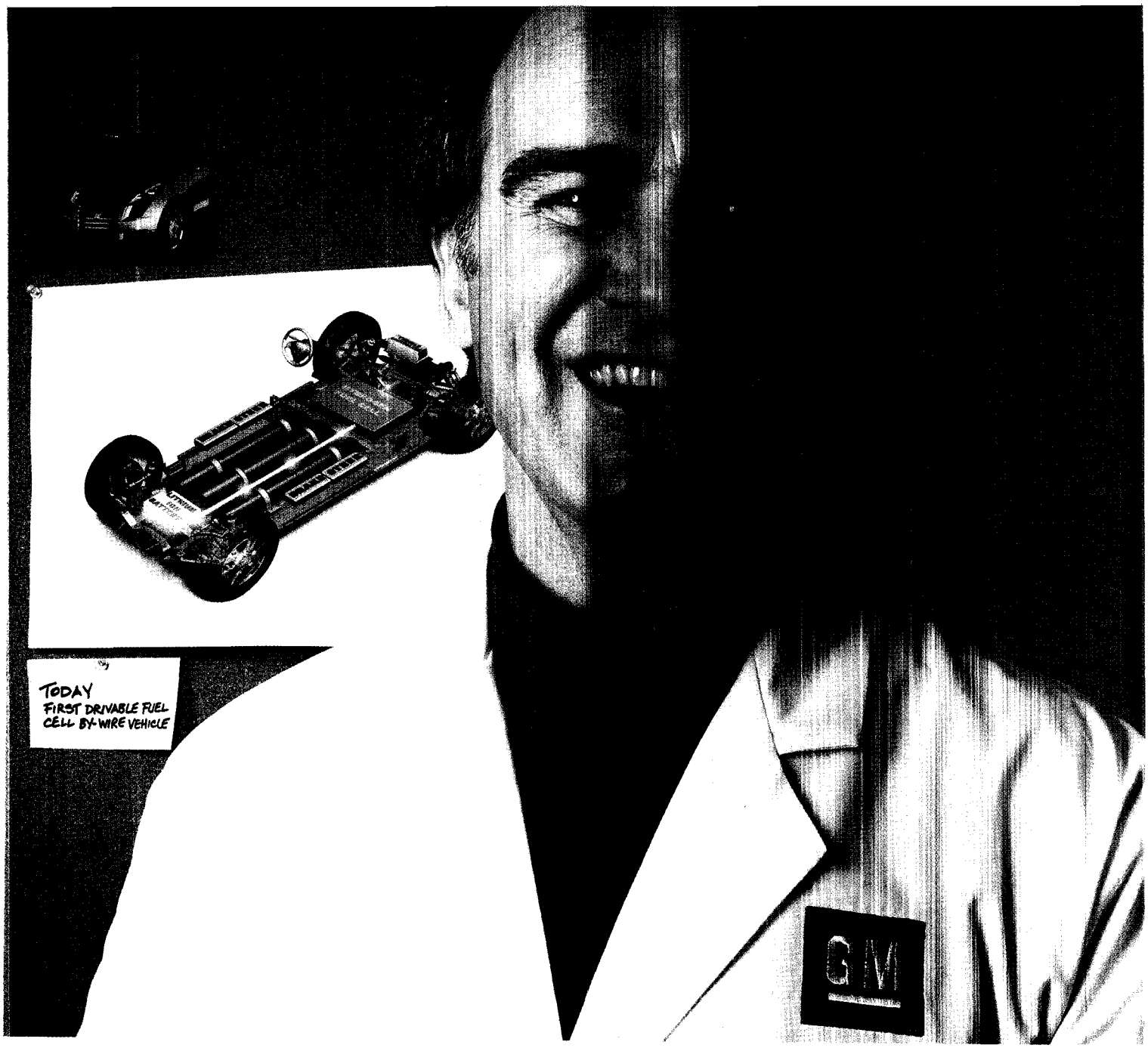

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CORRESPONDENCE

COVER CHARGE

YOUR RECENT EDITORIAL ON UNIversal health care skirts some key realities ("Moral Imperative," March 20 & 27). The health systems in France and Japan are very different. France has more hospital beds per capita than the United States, but many states have "certificate of need" regulations that prevent new hospitals from being built—unless newcomers can overcome incumbents' lobbying against competition. So increasing the number of hospital beds in the United States requires less government control, not more. And, in Japan, health insurance is provided by over 5,000 different plans; this competition leads to more effective investment in diagnosis and prevention. In the United States, competition between health insurers is also limited by states' mandates. In Canada, however, medically necessary physician and hospital services operate under a complete government monopoly and produce deadly waiting lists. Last year, Canada's Supreme Court determined that, in Quebec, this monopoly violated patients' civil rights.

Your editorial also cites questionable data about the number of uninsured in the United States. Although one 2004 Census Bureau survey (the Current Population Survey) puts it at just over 45 million, another series of surveys from the same agency (the Survey of Income and Program Participation) puts it at about half that estimate. Nor do you discuss how current government regulation needlessly increases prices of health insurance, physician and hospital services, and prescription drugs.

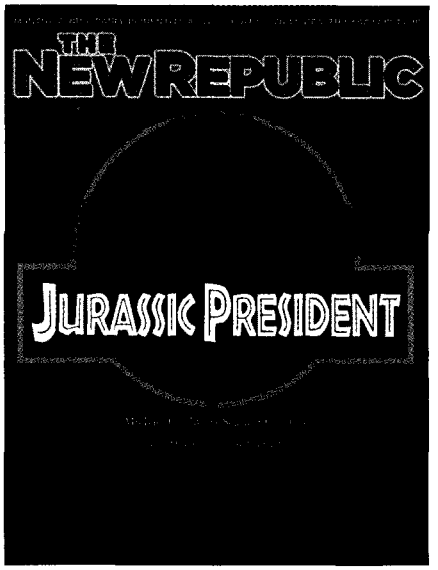
JOHN R. GRAHAM
Director, Health Care Studies
Pacific Research Institute
San Francisco, California

I AGREE WITH ALMOST ALL OF YOUR editorial, but you should stop repeating the liberal canard that Medicare is "efficient." True, Medicare's overhead costs, as a ratio of expenditures, are extremely low. But that is a sign of inattention, not efficiency. Take a tour of, say, the Medicare mills that line the strip malls of South Florida to confirm that Medicare pays almost all bills of any kind, no questions asked. Granted, the "incentive" fee structures—so dear to market theologians' hearts—mostly generate only a waste of paperwork. But the medical technology has outrun the ability of the average practice to cope, and intelligent medical management is sorely needed. A dollar-shoveling machine is not a model for reform.

CHARLES R. MORRIS
New York, New York

UNFORTUNATELY, THERE IS A REAson that the United States will never have universal coverage: No policymaker or health care advocate has the courage to face the bête noire *and* sine qua non of universal health care—rationing. Remember the patient enthusiasm for HMOs and managed care? In this country, when you are sick, the expectation is that you will get anything and everything available, and that you will get it *now*. And it's not simply an infatuation with twenty-first-century technology. Care for the sickest is inherently more resource-intensive, and it occurs at the cutting edge of available therapy—whatever that may be. It was penicillin, back when penicillin was new and expensive.

Demonize physicians for this if you wish, but, most of the time, it is driven by patient and family expectations and is a reflection of our national character. Delay is unacceptable, and for a physician not to offer an available therapy or even order an available test is to court accusations of malpractice. To equate bed counts or MRI machines to *amount* of care is specious, and neither the Japanese nor the French system is without rationing and capital expenditure limits in some form. Medicare may be "popular" and "efficient," but, last I heard, it was going bankrupt. Universal health care could no more afford to provide everything to everybody than universal transportation could afford to let every driver choose his or her own car. Tragically, every American would accept nothing less than a Ferrari.



ADAM ZIVIN
Seattle, Washington

THE EDITORS RESPOND:
We cited the wide availability of technology in Japan and ample supply of hospital beds in France as proof that universal health care can provide "more" health care than the U.S. system does, if that's the public's desire. John R. Graham can't dispute the statistics, so he suggests we've misinterpreted them. In his view, France and Japan have so many resources because they allow such free competition. But the governments of France and Japan interfere with their health care markets *more* aggressively than ours does, starting with the kind of price-setting for services that Ted Kennedy only dreams about here. And, of course, France and

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Japan guarantee insurance coverage to every citizen. We're not as wild about the Canadian system. Even so, the available statistical evidence suggests that, overall, Canadians end up just as healthy (if not healthier) than Americans, while spending considerably less on medical care. Plus, they don't have thousands of people dying every year because they lack insurance coverage. As for the data on the uninsured, even the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) finds that more than 40 million people are uninsured at any point in time. Conservatives argue that not all of those people are uninsured for the entire year, which is true. But when one hospitalization can drive you into bankruptcy—and when, as the SIPP also confirms, more than 80 million people will lose coverage over a two-year period—who cares?

Charles R. Morris makes an important critique of Medicare. Indeed, it probably could scrutinize payments even more carefully. But that's precisely why its low overhead is a virtue. It can afford to spend more on "intelligent medical management" and still deliver care with less waste than the private sector. That's also part of the answer to Adam Zivin. He's right that more isn't always better (although sometimes it is). Every society struggles to balance the demand for new medical treatments with the expense of paying for them. But countries with universal health care can produce solutions that are more efficient and that require less overall sacrifice.

FISH IN A BARREL

As someone who studies the poet John Milton for a living—and is thus a member of the field where Stanley Fish has made his most significant, and sometimes maddening, contributions—I spend a good deal of time resisting the temptation to which Leon Wieseltier openly succumbs: I struggle regularly not to be an "asshole" to Fish, even when the courtesy is not returned ("Jollies," March 20 & 27). This position also gives me some insight into Fish's piscine statements in *The New York Times* favoring the "strongly held faith" of Islamist zealotry over the invertebrate tendencies of modern liberalism. Surely he has in mind the distinction between liberty and license so important to Milton: "Licence they mean when they cry liberty; / For who loves that, must first be wise and good." Liberty in these terms is not simple absence of external constraint; it reaches its fullest expression when the virtuous produce upright action.

In this light, Wieseltier would do well to recognize that Fish is up to much more than cheap button-pushing. If he tends toward the irrational, he does so, again to cite Milton, to "bow things the contrary way, to make them come to their natural straightness"—in this case to provoke liberalism out of its present-day nothingarianism and into recovery of its sense of moral insistence (an errand quite in tune with sentiments regularly voiced in these pages and entirely in keeping with Wieseltier's truism that "free speech is the beginning of a liberal order, not the end").

FEISAL G. MOHAMED
Assistant Professor
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas

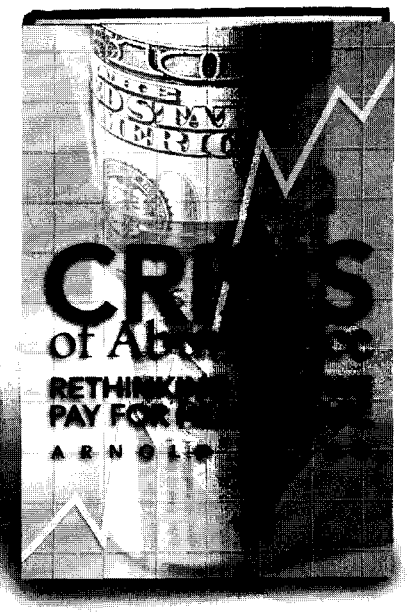
WAR BULL

Clay Risen draws an oversimplified conclusion from Robert McNamara's—and now Donald Rumsfeld's—Pentagon, implying that business ideas have no place in national defense ("War-Mart," April 3). Risen is right to point out the naïveté of the idea that the complex systems and multidimensional analytics that neatly solve business problems can be applied easily to problems of war-fighting. But the reason these don't work is not because the problems of war-fighting are so messy and intractable (which, of course, they are), but rather because complex systems and multidimensional analytics almost never solve business problems, either. It may not be a matter of life and death when large companies are trying to solve complicated business problems, but the "fog of war" is very much present in the form of disruptive technologies, organizational complexity, unpredictable competitors, and the many other forces that attenuate the link between an executive's action and the resulting business impact. The need to create the right outcomes despite these challenges is why businesses innovate. War-fighting is different, but, if we insist that it has *nothing* to learn from innovations in business, we are as mistaken as we would be in insisting that it has *everything* to learn from them.

LEE KEMPLER
New York, New York

This is one of the most important books written on health care.

—TYLER COWEN
Professor of Economics, George Mason University



This is a lucid and persuasive book— one of the most accessible guides I have ever seen to what is wrong with our health care system and how we might fix it. People of all ideological persuasions will find it enlightening and helpful.

— DANIEL SHAVIRO
Wayne Perry Professor of Taxation, New York University School of Law

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Rummy Punch

TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

OF COURSE GEORGE W. Bush should fire Donald Rumsfeld—it's no longer an interesting debate. Even the Iraq war's most fervent supporters—people like John McCain—have denounced Rumsfeld's refusal to send enough troops to secure Baghdad in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's fall. Rumsfeld's support is now concentrated among people less invested in the survival of Iraq than in the survival of Bush. And, even on the right, their numbers are dwindling fast.

The real question is whether, at this point, Rumsfeld's resignation would even make a difference. Pundits are like sports announcers: They have a professional interest in insisting that the game isn't over—that some dramatic, Hail Mary play could still turn the tide. But, no matter how hard they try, at some point fans turn off the television. And the American public is reaching that point on Iraq. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 57 percent of respondents said either that the United States can't win in Iraq or that it can but won't. Majorities want to withdraw at least some troops immediately. This fall, opinion in Congress will likely catch up to opinion in America. The newly elected Democrats—and there will be lots of them—will interpret their victories as mandates for rapid troop withdrawal. And, when they come to town, appropriating the money for a continued occupation will become much harder. At that point, it will hardly matter that Rumsfeld still has his job. He'll be a political undertaker.

In fact, if you think there is no hope in Iraq, it's better that Bush *not* fire Rumsfeld. That way, Bush supporters won't be able to pawn off blame on people who took over too late to do any good. Imagine, for instance, if John Kerry had won in 2004. It's unlikely Iraq would be any better today than it is now, but it is very likely that Republicans would be blaming Kerry for the mess. Keeping Rumsfeld has the virtue of clarity. Sending him off to his New Mexico estate—with a "thanks-for-a-great-career" pat on the back, if not a presidential medal of freedom (L. Paul Bremer and George Tenet both have them)—would almost be too kind. Simply serving as secretary of defense in the ugly days to come might be the worst punishment of all.

But if you *do* think there's hope for Iraq, Rumsfeld must be fired immediately. And, since Bush presumably still does, it is amazing that he can't see the political logic staring him in the face. Bush prides himself on his loyalty. And, in certain circumstances, it is indeed admirable. One of Bush's finest moments came after he was walloped in the 2000 New Hampshire primary by John McCain, when he assembled his top advisers in a room and told them that he took all the blame, and no one would be fired. If Kerry or Al Gore had shown that kind of loyalty to the people who ran their campaigns, they might have gotten some in return—and one or both might have become president.

But reinforcing Bush's loyalty is a frightening intellectual parochialism and a near-pathological fear of appearing politically weak. And those less admirable qualities are blinding him to the fact that his give-no-quarter, stay-the-course, brand-the-critics-as-wusses strategy for selling the war has utterly failed. As *The Washington Post*'s David Ignatius recently noted, Bush has been aggressively promoting his Iraq policy for months now. And the more speeches he gives, the more support drops. The public has turned off the television.

If there's any chance of getting them to take a second look (absent good news from Iraq, which seems depressingly unlikely), it starts with separating the debate over what we should do now in Iraq from the debate over whether we should have invaded in the first place. There are legitimate arguments for rapid withdrawal. But the withdrawal argument has also become a way for people to emphasize their opposition to the initial decision to go to war. Opposing continued occupation—like opposing the $87 billion supplemental in 2003—has become part of a larger effort to hold the Bush administration accountable for its disastrous mistakes.

The best way to disentangle the two debates would be to replace Rumsfeld with someone who opposed the war to begin with. Bush would have to invest that person with tremendous power. Ideally, his or her appointment would coincide with the dismantling of Dick Cheney's shadow national security staff—thus demoting Cheney to the level of past vice presidents. And he or she should also be given the authority to replace John Bolton, which would be a useful olive branch to an enraged Congress, not to mention the rest of the planet. Finally, Rumsfeld's successor should be given the authority to reconsider all aspects of Iraq policy—as Clark Clifford did when he replaced Robert McNamara late in Lyndon Johnson's presidency. (That is not to say a successor need decide about Iraq what Clifford decided about Vietnam: that it is unwinnable. Only that Clifford brought intellectual openness to a White House grown agoraphobic, which is exactly what the Bush White House has become today).

My nominee would be Brent Scowcroft. I'm not a big fan of his rather amoral brand of realism. But, in Iraq today, it hardly matters. Even if Scowcroft wanted to put a pliant dictator in charge of Iraq, at this point, he couldn't. And he would bring key assets to the job. As a retired lieutenant general who also served as national security adviser, he is well-positioned to repair the civil-military gulf that Rumsfeld has created. And, as a vocal war critic from the very beginning, he might win a serious hearing on Capitol Hill and from the American people. If he came out for rapid withdrawal, this goodwill would hardly be necessary; he would be running with the wind. But, if he determined that the United States should stay for a couple more years—that doing so offers at least the fleeting hope that Iraq's center can hold—he might prove able to bring Congress along. He might convincingly tell the American people what Rumsfeld, and Bush himself, never credibly could: that we're all in this Iraq mess together.

Such an appointment, of course, is radically unlikely. It would require Bush to break out of his intellectual bubble, to put his trust in his political adversaries, to very publicly eat crow. A more creative, more honest, more confident leader might do that. And America badly needs such a leader in these grim times. Unfortunately, it has George W. Bush—and likely Donald Rumsfeld, too.

PETER BEINART

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Mother Load

FORGET ROBINS, DAFFODILS, and tax returns—it wouldn't be spring without a new skirmish in the perennial "mommy wars." By now, we all know the combatants: On one side, the self-righteous stay-at-home mom who has "opted out" of the workplace to spend her days mashing bananas; on the other, the harried career drone who barely blows her babe a kiss as she sprints out of the day care center. Most recently, these figures have duked it out in a special series on "Good Morning America" and in a new book edited by Leslie Morgan Steiner called—what else?—*Mommy Wars*.

This setup always felt like a contrivance, a media-manufactured conflict based on hype and hyperbole. Indeed, "The Motherhood Study," a report issued last year by the Institute for American Values, found no evidence of any ideological divide between mothers who work and those who stay at home. For all but the most privileged, the mommy wars are not only a myth, but a dangerous diversion from the true scandal of parenthood in contemporary America.

Since the baby-boomers came of age, American family life has undergone a quiet revolution. The majority of children now grow up with both parents working outside the home—often out of financial necessity. But, taking its cues from reactionaries and solipsistic liberal elites, our public policy still treats working mothers as a casualty of the culture wars rather than an on-the-ground reality. The primary governmental protection for workers with new babies (read: women) is the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), signed by President Clinton in 1993, which guarantees just twelve weeks of unpaid leave to those who work for employers with 50 or more workers. Some companies offer paid maternity leave at their discretion, but not the federal government. It requires employees to use their sick leave instead.

On April 7, Representatives Carolyn Maloney, Tom Davis, and Steny Hoyer—recognizing that "the current policy isn't very family-friendly"—reintroduced the Federal Employees Paid Parental Leave Act, which would guarantee federal workers six weeks of paid leave to care for newborns or adopted babies. This would be a symbolically meaningful step. Let's hope it doesn't suffer the same fate as the Balancing Act, another working-mother-friendly bill that, among other things, offers paid FMLA leave, an additional $500 million in child care subsidies, and incentives to encourage telecommuting. Representative Lynn Woolsey first introduced the bill in February 2004 and reintroduced it last April to silence from the Republican leadership.

It comes as no surprise that aid to working parents isn't Congress's first priority: Business has been understandably unenthusiastic about the calls for increased benefits, flex-time, and other working-mom "perks." In a corporate culture that values face time and late nights at the office, suggestions of flexibility are reflexively dismissed as a drain on productivity. But, slowly, this culture has been changing—often as companies realize the brain drain of moms-in-flight. Ernst & Young, noticing a high turnover rate among its female employees, piloted a project in the mid-'90s that allowed all workers to telecommute; the firm's percentage of women partners has since tripled. Other corporations, including Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer, have created new reduced-hour jobs designed for working mothers. With women now constituting 46 percent of the U.S. workforce and receiving more college degrees than men, there are clear economic incentives for businesses to develop similar third-way options.

But the real roadblock isn't economic; it's cultural. Republicans have long denounced federal funding for child care as a threat to the American family, as Richard Nixon argued in his veto of a 1971 bill to establish a national child-care system. Never mind that, during World War II, in response to the influx of women into the workforce, the government funded centers that offered working moms not only child care but also laundry service and packaged hot dinners. Thirty-five years after Nixon, the view persists that for the government to legislate on behalf of working women is to take sides in the culture wars. And this is the most grievous damage the mommy wars have wrought. The upper-class dilemma of whether women should choose to work or to stay at home—and the moral weight of that choice—has dominated the discussion. But how about the moral weight of working-class parents who must work and can be "one sick child away from being fired," in the words of a recent report issued by the Center for WorkLife Law? It's time to get real. The cultural revolution has already occurred. The real threat to the American family is the policies that lag behind it. ■

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The challenge to Joe Lieberman.

The Lamonsters

BY JASON ZENGERLE

LET THE RECORD show that Ned Lamont does not consider Joe Lieberman a whiny-ass titty baby. Nor does he believe that Connecticut's junior senator is a douchebag, an ass clown, or any of the other nasty names liberal bloggers have called Lieberman—whom, with those bloggers' help, Lamont hopes to defeat in this August's Democratic primary. "I really regret that rhetoric," Lamont said one recent afternoon, blushing a little as some of the derogatory appellations for Lieberman were read back to him. "I think he's a good man, I think he's a patriot, I think he does what he thinks is right. ... I just happen to think he's wrong."

Ned Lamont

Lamont was sitting in a closet-like room in his sparsely furnished campaign headquarters outside of Hartford. He was wearing a Patagonia fleece vest over his shirt and tie, making him look every bit like the Bobo-ish Greenwich millionaire cable TV executive he is—or, rather, was, until he concluded that Lieberman was so wrong in his support for the war in Iraq that Connecticut Democrats needed to replace him. "I wasn't my first choice to run for the U.S. Senate," conceded Lamont, who—with his reddish hair and eager, almost anxious, demeanor—bears a slight resemblance to the actor William H. Macy. In fact, Lamont tried to convince any number of professional politicians to launch a primary challenge against Lieberman, but none were willing. "It's a little like General Motors," he said. "The vice president doesn't challenge the senior vice president who doesn't challenge the executive vice president. I think there's a certain pecking order, and people sort of wait their turn. ... And so they said, 'Well, Ned, if you feel so strongly, you do it.' "

He did, and, since officially announcing his candidacy in March, Lamont has mounted a surprisingly serious challenge to Lieberman, who, in his previous two reelection races, faced only token opposition from Republicans—much less from a fellow Democrat. In his campaign's first 45 days, Lamont raised close to $350,000 from more than 4,000 online donors (he plans to substantially build on that dollar figure in the coming weeks with a series of nonvirtual fundraisers in Massachusetts and California; and he has already contributed $370,000 of his own money to his campaign). And he appears to be well on his way toward securing the support of 15 percent of the delegates to his party's state convention and the petition signatures of 15,000 Connecticut Democrats—either one of which will earn him a spot on the Democratic primary ballot. "Even people who had a pretty rosy view of Lamont's chances are surprised at how many delegates he seems to be able to turn," *The Hartford Courant* political columnist Colin McEnroe recently said on Hartford's WTIC-TV. "[Lieberman's] got a real nailbiter on his hands."

Indeed, by taking on Lieberman, Lamont has become a hero to those who reside in the angriest corners of the state and national Democratic Party—and whose brief against Lieberman goes well beyond his support for the war. (To wit, one ardent Lamont supporter who blogs at *Daily Kos* recently trash-talked: "Lieberman is a disloyal, Bush-kissing, torture-loving asshole who hasn't done shit for CT in years.") These Lieberman-haters hail Lamont for his "Nedrenaline" and celebrate his "Nedmentum." He is, in their eyes, "the anti-Lieberman." "Ned has a gift," a blogger at the website *My Left Nutmeg* recently wrote. "The more people see and hear Ned the more they like him and that's the polar opposite of our current junior senator." But, as Lamont seems to be discovering, being a hero to this rabid crowd is a strange role for a mild-mannered guy like himself.

THE 52-YEAR-OLD Lamont isn't a complete political novice, but, up until now, his political activities have tended, like his personality, to be of a moderate nature. He was elected as a selectman in his ultra-rich, ultra-Republican hometown of Greenwich and was appointed by the Independent (and formerly Republican) governor, Lowell Weicker, to serve as the chairman of Connecticut's pension oversight board. He has also donated money to numerous moderate state and national Democratic candidates over the years, including Lieberman. Even as a student in the mid-'70s at Harvard—where the undergraduate library is named after his great-grandfather, a former chairman of J.P. Morgan—Lamont steered clear of the radicals: His one major political act in Cambridge was to help bring the Indiana Democratic senator and 1976 presidential candidate Birch Bayh to campus.

But Lamont's campaign against Lieberman has now brought him face-to-face with the radical fringe. And, as he continued to talk in his campaign office, he sounded very

DAVID COWLES

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much like a prude who had wandered into a swingers' club and was still trying to convince himself that he was comfortable with what he'd seen. "I was not a big blog guy," Lamont said, admitting that he tended to get most of his news from the "mainstreet" media. "But I've looked at them a lot more in the last 60 days than I did in the previous 52 years." Then, there are the people Lamont has met on the campaign trail who have exposed him to issues to which he'd previously not given much thought. "Oh boy, I get a lot of questions about media concentration," he said with a sigh. "Yeah, 'GE owns NBC or Murdoch owns Fox and DirecTV,' you know. I'm in media so I'm supposed to be more outraged by that than I probably am." And, of course, he has been feeling some pressure to stake out more extreme positions than those with which he's comfortable. He recalled a recent campaign appearance at the University of Connecticut, during which a student asked him whether he supported impeaching President Bush for war crimes. "Gee, I was thinking maybe we'd censure him for FISA," Lamont said.

Like many of his supporters, Lamont has tried to turn his disagreement with Lieberman about the war—which, according to a February poll, is opposed by 61 percent of Connecticut residents—into a broader indictment of Lieberman's party disloyalty. "I doubt that anybody will call me 'George Bush's favorite Democrat,' " Lamont typically says on the stump, going on to declare that, if he wins, "You're not losing a senator, you're gaining a Democrat." But, when pressed on the issue of what exactly makes Lieberman such a bad Democrat, Lamont doesn't seem to have the heart to argue the case too forcefully. "He supported the energy bill," Lamont said, "and it was Senator Lieberman who, on 'Meet the Press,' said, 'Of course the federal government has got to intervene in the Terri Schiavo case.' " But, soon, Lamont circled back to the war. "I'd say Senator Lieberman has been all Iraq, all the time," he continued. "So it's not necessarily a question of being wrong on these [Democratic] issues, it's just sort of being silent."

Even when it comes to President Bush—who may be the only person Lamont's supporters hate more than Lieberman—the candidate tends to pull his punches. "I don't dislike people, I'm not that type of person," Lamont said of Bush. "Was I ever sympathetic to his politics or what he was trying to do? No." Still, Lamont did confess that he respected some of Bush's symbolic actions in the immediate aftermath of September 11. "I liked it when he went to the Yankee game," Lamont said. "That was gutsy as hell. I mean, I was putting on plastic gloves to open the mail coming into my office."

AFTER A WHILE, it was time for Lamont to hit the trail, so he got into his Lexus convertible, which, for the moment, was serving as his campaign car. (A few days later, the campaign bought, as the candidate put it, a more "politically correct" vehicle—a Ford hybrid.) As his driver weaved in and out of traffic, incurring the wrath of other motorists, Lamont seemed relieved that he had failed to get one of his campaign stickers to adhere to the Lexus's bumper. "Maybe I should put a Lieberman sticker on the car," he said.

Eventually, Lamont arrived in the Hartford suburb of Windsor to meet that town's Democratic committee. It was about the twentieth such town committee Lamont had visited in his pursuit of at least 240 delegates to the Connecticut Democratic Party convention in May. But the Windsor meeting was special, since it was that town committee's 34-to-one vote in February to reprimand Lieberman for his support of the war that partly inspired Lamont to get into the race. "There's a sense that our 132,000 troops stuck in the middle of a bloody civil war are not making the situation better," he told the crowd of about 60 people—the men mostly in plaid shirts and with beards; the women primarily wearing sweaters and sensible shoes—who had gathered in the town hall. "We're going to have to start investing in this country again. We're spending three hundred million dollars a day over in Iraq; we're going to have to start investing in our own infrastructure and our own democracy."

When the crowd finished applauding Lamont, a Lieberman staffer named Ken Dagliere addressed the committee. (Lieberman himself would appear before the committee the following weekend.) Dagliere, a portly man in an ill-fitting suit, had recently been detailed from Lieberman's Senate office in Washington to work on the tightening campaign, and he didn't seem terribly pleased to be there. Desperately scanning the room for friendly faces, he beseeched those in attendance not to let their views on the war cloud their judgment. "Obviously, you know, we can all disagree about that, but there are a lot of things we agree on," he pleaded, citing instances in which Lieberman had opposed or criticized the Bush administration. He rattled off a laundry list of liberal interest groups that had given Lieberman high marks for his voting record. And then he trotted out the hoariest argument available to incumbents—the argument about seniority. "He's a member of the Armed Services Committee," Dagliere said of Lieberman. "He has great influence in obtaining Department of Defense contracts." But the crowd seemed unimpressed, peppering Dagliere with hostile questions, such as why Lieberman's campaign literature fails to mention his foreign policy views. "Frankly, I just don't want Senator Lieberman representing my party," said one questioner. "How do you respond to that?" Dagliere stammered for a moment and then was speechless.

After the meeting, Lamont stood in the town hall's vestibule and received well-wishers. "We're with you all the way," said one man sporting a SUPPORT THE TROOPS / IMPEACH BUSH button. It had been a good night for Lamont, and, as he made his way across the emptying parking lot to his Lexus, he seemed to have only one regret. "There was all that talk about Lieberman's seniority," Lamont said. "But his seniority hasn't done us much good," noting that Connecticut is forty-ninth out of 50 states in terms of the federal aid it receives compared with the tax dollars it sends to Washington. "I didn't want to say that at the meeting, though," he continued. "I don't like being that confrontational." ■

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What if *Roe* is overturned.

Half-Life

BY RAMESH PONNURU

THE NEW REPUBLIC's editorial line on abortion has always had the virtue of contrarianism. If *Roe* v. *Wade* were ever to topple, this magazine argues, it would be bad news for the pro-life Republicans who hate *Roe*—and good news for the pro-choice Democrats who have fought to keep it. Once the issue migrates from the courts to the political arena, Republicans would no longer have the luxury of an abortion politics that consists of slogans and symbols and handed-down opinions. Republican politicians would finally be forced either to support new bans on abortion (thus alienating the political middle) or stand down (thus alienating their pro-life base). Either way, the costs for the GOP would be high. At least, that has been the counterintuitive TNR scenario.

Well, congratulations, TNR. Your argument is no longer so contrarian. Pundits now widely share the opinion that the end of *Roe* would be "a disaster for the Republican Party," as *National Journal*'s Stuart Taylor Jr. recently put it. Morton Kondracke recently wrote in *Roll Call* that "Republicans should thank their lucky stars" that the Court is unlikely to revisit *Roe*. But, before we further enshrine this strain of conventional wisdom, let's consider the shape of a post-*Roe* world a bit more carefully. THE NEW REPUBLIC's theory is, if I can be so bold, a mite too convenient for complacent pro-choicers. The truth is that the public is not as pro-choice as this magazine would like to believe, nor are pro-lifers so tactically inept.

LET'S BEGIN WITH THE NEW REPUBLIC's assumptions about public opinion. It has some facts on its side. A large majority supports *Roe* v. *Wade*. But the polls on *Roe* are somewhat misleading. They reflect public hostility to drastic change on abortion policy, as well as public misunderstandings about how drastic reversing *Roe* would be. Many people think it would automatically ban all abortions nationwide, when it would really only give legislators and voters the power to set abortion policy.

TNR is on firmer ground in pointing out that most Americans tell pollsters that they believe abortion should generally be permitted in the first trimester. But a very different picture emerges from other polls. Strong majorities think that abortion should be permitted in cases of rape, incest, threats to the mother's life, and severe fetal abnormality. But there aren't clear majorities for any other types of abortion. Indeed, polls have regularly found that small majorities of the public—including small majorities of women—believe that abortions for other reasons should be prohibited. Gallup has also consistently found that a large majority of the public thinks abortion should be either illegal or legal "only in a few circumstances."

I am aware of only one poll that allowed respondents to choose options that included both what one might call the moderate pro-life option (prohibiting abortion with exceptions for rape, incest, and the mother's life) and the moderate pro-choice option (allowing abortion for any reason in the first trimester). This poll was conducted by Richard Wirthlin, who is, admittedly, himself a pro-lifer, in November 2004. He found 55 percent taking either moderate or hardcore pro-life positions, compared with 40 percent on the pro-choice side. If that's in the ballpark, you can expect more support for restrictive laws than the polls TNR likes to cite.

But the post-*Roe* world is likely to be messier than any poll would predict. There are many scenarios to consider. In one, abortion becomes grist for Congress. According to most pundits, this would be the worst outcome for Republicans, the one in which their politically unpalatable choices would be starkest. These pundits imagine the Republican base forcing its congressmen to pursue a maximalist ban on abortion. That is certainly a possibility. Pro-life legislators in South Dakota weren't even willing to wait for *Roe* to go before trying to ban abortion.

Honesty, however, should compel TNR to admit that pro-choicers have also been known to overreach. It was their insistence, in 1993 and 1994, that the Freedom of Choice Act include public funding of abortion that stymied the legislation. Most pro-lifers, meanwhile, have embraced an incrementalist strategy—pushing for small-bore legislation like the ban on partial-birth abortion rather than a Human Life Amendment to the Constitution—over the last decade.

Maybe, then, it would be Democrats who would be stuck with an uncomfortable calculus: Do they please a liberal base that wants to keep late-term abortions legal or a general public that doesn't? The Supreme Court has required states to allow abortions even late in pregnancy to protect a woman's emotional health. There are very few states—there may be no states—that would enact a similar law. Existing abortion law is sufficiently liberal that the pro-choice side can only lose ground in democratic votes. You can criticize the pro-choice insistence that this issue be kept in the courtroom for any number of reasons, but you can't say it's irrational. In other words, it's not just pro-life politicians whom the Supreme Court has shielded.

But this scenario isn't the most likely outcome. America's federalist system ensures that. With *Roe* gone, much of the abortion debate would move away from Washington, though it would not leave D.C. entirely. There would still be judicial confirmation battles: Pro-choicers would demand justices who would reinstate *Roe*, and pro-lifers would fight

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Abortion foes, like these marchers protesting the twenty-fifth anniversary of Roe *v.* Wade, *won't forfeit a winning political issue if* Roe *is overturned.*

them. But neither side would likely have enough strength to impose its policy nationally. Some congressmen would seek a compromise for the whole country—requiring all states, for example, to allow first-trimester abortion but to prohibit later abortions. But such compromises would probably fail. Pro-lifers would want to retain the option to pursue more stringent South Dakota–style prohibitions, and pro-choicers would want states like California to preserve looser laws. Other states' rights–minded congressmen would think a federal policy unwise, and some would want to kick the issue back to the states to continue avoiding any responsibility for the issue. The safe bet is for a congressional stalemate.

So most of the action would be in the state legislatures. Either side could overreach in individual state legislatures, but sweeping nationwide change would be off the table. Voters would therefore have less reason for anxiety about Republican anti-abortion zealotry. Neither side's activists would have the incentive that exists today to impose rigorous tests of commitment on presidential candidates. If, after a while, it became clear that the federal courts were going to stay out of abortion policy, pro-lifers would cease to care as much if the Republican nominee disagreed with them. The debate over abortion could become, in this respect, like the one over evolution. Large numbers of Americans are passionate on both sides of the debate, and it flares up in various localities. But there is not much national policy on it, and politicians in Washington don't have to spend much time on it.

Local politicians, meanwhile, would adapt to local conditions. In strongly pro-choice jurisdictions, most Republican politicians would either adopt pro-choice views or temper their pro-life ones. Most Democratic politicians would do the same in strongly pro-life areas. They do this already, of course, but, in a post-*Roe* world, they would not have to worry as much about the effect of their abortion views on their national ambitions within their parties. It's a near-perfect solution for Republicans: The base would be enthused, since it could more comfortably win discrete policy victories in legislatures. But pro-choice Republicans could more comfortably vote for Republican candidates, especially candidates for federal office.

THUS FAR, WE have been considering the consequences of a straight reversal of *Roe*. But it's more likely that the Supreme Court would repeal *Roe* in installments. The current Court might be willing to allow prohibitions on partial-birth abortion, for example. A future Court, with new anti-*Roe* appointees, might later conclude that its abortion jurisprudence was unworkable and get out of the inherently subjective business of deciding what constitutes an impermissible "undue burden" on the right to abortion.

Judicial gradualism might cause pro-life politicians some short-term political heartburn. The Court would be, for some period of time, poised to strike down *Roe* without having actually done so. That would maximize fears—on the part of both pro-choice voters and pro-life politicians—of what the consequences of repeal would be. But what's more important is that state legislatures would regain lawmaking authority over abortion bit by bit, probably starting with the ability to impose the most politically popular regulations. In such circumstances, the pro-life movement would hardly lose its fervor and political raison d'être.

This is how the *Planned Parenthood* v. *Casey* decision in 1992 played out. *Roe* was reaffirmed by a five-to-four vote but modestly scaled back. Pro-lifers, who had expected a reversal of *Roe*, were demoralized, and pro-choicers were galvanized. Since then, however, pro-lifers have used the increased room to maneuver provided by *Casey* to put pro-choicers on the defensive. It's because of *Casey* that most states have enacted informed-consent laws, for example.

Pro-lifers who are incrementalist in strategy and moderate in tone would, in short, be positioned to do quite well after *Roe* fell, and the Republican Party would have enough flexibility to prosper. The theory that pro-lifers would be dealt a stunning setback by the realization of their fondest goal is interestingly counterintuitive, and it has become a shibboleth for sophisticated pundits. But it's probably wrong. ■

SCOTT J. FERRELL/CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY/NEWSCOM

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Trying war criminals locally.

Balkan Legal

BY ADAM M. SMITH

FOUR YEARS, 466 hearing days, more than 300 witnesses, and over $200 million after it began in The Hague, Case Number IT-02-54, *Prosecutor* v. *Slobodan Milosevic*, was officially declared over on March 14, three days after Milosevic was found dead of an apparent heart attack in his prison cell. There will be no verdict. Following the dictates of international law, the U.N.'s Yugoslavia war-crimes tribunal in The Hague does not prosecute defendants in absentia, which means that the "butcher of the Balkans" died legally innocent of any of the war-crimes charges so painstakingly and expensively arrayed against him.

This result has led to disquiet and dissatisfaction in the halls of The Hague tribunal and, perhaps more importantly, at home in the Balkans. Images of thousands of weeping Serbs on the streets of Belgrade, and proclamations of Slobo's martyr status by Serb hardliners, have left many in the Balkans feeling robbed, not just by Milosevic's ill-timed demise, but by The Hague itself. In fact, many think The Hague's days as the primary venue for war-crimes trials are over. But how will justice be served in the future?

Michael Johnson might have the answer. When I first met Johnson at his office in Sarajevo in March 2005, he was covered in sawdust, and, after a quick introduction, he excused himself to move a safe. "Sometimes, if you want it done right," he said as he rolled up his sleeves. Outside his office doors, construction crews roamed the hallway, laboring to put the finishing touches on Bosnia and Herzegovina's new war-crimes court, which Johnson, an American lawyer, had been asked by the U.N. representative in Sarajevo to set up.

At first glance, what Johnson and his staff have built may not seem novel. Architecturally, the pink-hued courthouse, sitting on a hillside overlooking Sarajevo, fits unobtrusively into the Bosnian capital's Istanbul-meets-Innsbruck skyline. Even inside the building, there is little to distinguish it from the world's other war-crimes courts. Visitors familiar with the U.N.'s Yugoslavia tribunal in The Hague, its Rwanda tribunal in Arusha, Tanzania, or even the new International Criminal Court, will immediately feel at home. Johnson spent many years working at U.N. tribunals. And his decisions—to place the polished-wood defense and prosecution stands at a particular (and, to American eyes, peculiar) angle in each court, to install a bevy of flat-panel monitors throughout the tribunal, even to use U.N.-quality microphones and translation headphones—confirm the emergence of a kind of war-crimes chic in interior design.

In its operations, however, the court is unique, both for Bosnia and for the world. Unlike the U.N.'s Special Court for Sierra Leone, the International Criminal Court (which is presently investigating Darfur), or South Africa's nonjudicial, post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, this court is a domestic judicial body. It uses existing domestic law and adheres to existing domestic judicial procedures. Rather than having the international community extradite and try war criminals, the new court raises the possibility of states dispensing post-conflict justice on their own terms, in their own courts, with only limited international involvement. It is a long overdue experiment, and it's one that may hold the key to allowing states—in the Balkans and elsewhere—to deal with their vexed pasts.

SINCE 1993, THE Hague tribunal has convicted more than 40 individuals who perpetrated war crimes during the 1991–1995 Yugoslav civil war. Though most Bosnians supported the tribunal at first, ever since the 1995 Dayton Accords ended the conflict, Bosnian citizens have expressed increasing dissatisfaction that they are standing on the sidelines in the search for justice. Not only is The Hague a world away from the conflict zone, but also, outside its translators, almost no Balkan citizen has ever been employed by the tribunal. A former Hague prosecutor argued to me that such discriminatory hiring was necessary to "stem leaks" of sensitive information. Regardless, in Bosnia, which is run as a fiefdom under the rule of a U.N.-authorized "High Representative," this judicial impotence compounds a more pervasive emasculation of almost all government and civil society.

The Hague tribunal has built an impressive body of international criminal law, and it has incarcerated a number of war criminals. But other goals of criminal law—reconciliation and deterrence, to name two—have remained effectively unmet. The United Nations itself seems to agree: Its own chief legal officer, Assistant Secretary-General for Legal Affairs Ralph Zacklin, has all but disowned the tribunal, calling its approach "no longer politically or financially viable." A senior U.N. official in the region is even more direct, bluntly admitting to me that, while the tribunal has taken some of the Balkans' "biggest thugs" off the streets, it has not repaired Yugoslav society. "The [Hague] has failed; ironically, the Balkans are probably more likely to Balkanize now than at any time since Dayton," he laments.

The establishment of the new court was catalyzed by these mounting frustrations, as well as by the international community's fatigue at funding the remarkably expensive Hague tribunal (more than $250 million for 2006–2007). The United Nations has decided to conclude the tribunal's trials by 2008; in preparation, cases yet to be heard—and thousands of others that have been investigated but in which indictments have not yet been issued—will be sent back to domestic courts in the Balkans. Johnson's new Sarajevo court

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was designed, in part, to handle these cases.

The case transfers, however, had been stalled, largely over suspicions that ethnic minority defendants would not receive fair trials at the hands of ethnic majority judges. Such apprehension is not without merit. Immediately following the conflict, Croatia began a series of war-crimes trials of its own, almost always prosecuting Serbs. The cases had a conviction rate of 90 percent and often ended with absurd results: In a proceeding against Svetozar Karan, a Serb, the court found him not only guilty of war crimes, but also of the entire 500-year history of Serb crimes against Croatia.

The new Sarajevo court was designed to overcome such problems. Through a domestic court, the Bosnian government received a $16 million grant (largely from the United States) to build a tribunal whose facilities and technology equaled those of The Hague. In order to manage potential bias, court personnel have been recruited from across Bosnia and from abroad. International judges sit alongside domestic jurists, and locals and foreigners work throughout the tribunal. But, unlike other aspects of the international presence in Bosnia, the international role in the court is limited by a statutory provision calling for full domestication of court functions within five years.

The court has had a rocky start. Since opening last spring, it has battled a corruption investigation (with allegations made against one of the international judges), an almost absent public profile (with recent surveys indicating that less than 60 percent of Bosnians are aware that the new court even exists), and a tense relationship with the still-functioning Hague court. But the court has also quickly bulked up its staff (it already employs several hundred), and it has made special efforts to ensure that local staff are not mere tokens—locals work on all levels of the court hierarchy.

AFTER 50 YEARS of communism, five years of war, and the last decade of international control, Bosnia has developed a legal and political order that is decidedly not its own, from the country's new criminal code (which, by a strange twist of legal fate, is partially modeled on Alaska's) to its thoroughly compromised national symbols (which include a national anthem "sung" without any words). The court is an attempt to rebuild some local ownership over the state. Its first real tests, now underway, are the transferred trials of two Bosnian Serbs—Radovan Stankovic and Gojko Jankovic—both accused of the systematic enslavement and rape of Muslim women. About a dozen further cases are set to be transferred from The Hague later this year. Already, the court represents a new chapter in homegrown justice for Bosnia and Herzegovina and a new model for other corners of the globe scarred by crimes against humanity. "It is time for justice to come home," an exasperated law student at the University of Sarajevo told me when I met with a group of students at the law college, down the street from the bombed-out national library. "It is time for us to do some of this ourselves." ■

Against celebrity chefs.

Flayed Alive

BY KELLY ALEXANDER

"DON'T LIKE IT!" my two-year-old pronounced over his bowl of homemade rice pudding the other day. This is the rice pudding into which I had (lovingly! painstakingly!) added hand-grated Vietnamese cinnamon and organic raisins. Budding food critic that he is, he reminded me of how a chef's life can be a total drag: Regardless of how delicious your concoction, your success depends entirely upon the whims of your diner's taste.

That's the way it used to be, at least. Now? Not so much. The level of fame that some chefs in this country have achieved has created a culture of intense reverse snobbery. A friend related that, instead of a hefty tip for good food and service, every time he leaves a restaurant these days he feels as if nothing less than falling to his knees and bending at the waist in the classic "we're not worthy" pose will do. Indeed, a recent story by Alex Witchel in *The New York Times* described a situation in which the author, having turned down a chef-offered tasting menu, felt snubbed herself: "Is it unreasonable, at least sometimes, to want to eat dinner instead of worshipping at the altar of the resident genius?" she asked.

I know just what she means. In the roughly 20 years that I've been observing, and ultimately writing about, food, I've had a front-row seat at a revolution. Twenty years ago, the Food Network did not exist. There was no "Emeril." (Emeril Lagasse was the executive chef at a popular restaurant in New Orleans.) Chefs were not considered rock stars; they were just the guys in the white jackets who made your dinner, and, unfortunately, they weren't particularly well-compensated for their efforts. I could count on one hand the number of truly noteworthy professional culinary institutions in this country. In fact, the most famous cook in the United States, Julia Child, was no restaurant chef at all—she was a cookbook author and a teacher.

Suffice it to say that times have changed. Culinary celebrities like Rachael Ray garner million-dollar book deals, Emeril is a bona fide brand, and the ShawGuides *Guide to Cooking Schools* reports that almost 500 accredited culinary institutions conduct classes in the United States. While I applaud the fact that it's now possible for chefs not only to emerge from the shadows of obscurity, but also to make

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decent money in the process, there has been a rather large downside to this phenomenon: A cult of personality has been created, and a chef's primary goal now seems to be media attention.

Bobby Flay

OF COURSE, CHEFS have used their positions to advance themselves in society for a lot longer than 20 years. Perhaps not incidentally, most of history's top chefs have been genius self-promoters. Antonin Carême, the most famous of the nineteenth-century French chefs, started cooking in a tavern as an illiterate ten-year-old and died having written the definitive guide to the art of pastry and also cooked for Napoleon, Czar Alexander I, and Metternich (one must admire the way he never let his national feeling stand in the way of employment). Carême was notorious for playing to the society types he worked for, including both Talleyrand and James de Rothschild.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, another Frenchman, Auguste Escoffier, partnered with hotelier César Ritz to revolutionize the hotel business. In addition to creating a vast number of the dishes we now associate with haute cuisine, he was also the culinary world's first activist. Forget such headaches as rising Manhattan rents and procurement of organic grain-fed pork; chefs in this era were battling horribly low life expectancies due to their work conditions, including long hours in unventilated basements inhaling carbon monoxide from wood- and coal-burning ovens. Escoffier did much to improve these conditions, and, along the way, he also cultivated relationships with important celebrities—chiefly by naming dishes after them, as in the case of opera singer Dame Nellie Melba (the ice cream dessert "peach Melba") and composer Gioacchino Rossini (the luxurious beef tenderloin dish "tournedos Rossini").

One wonders what these European whisk-wielders would have thought of the man who was probably the first American chef with a household name: Hector Boiardi. In the 1930s, demand for the spaghetti sauce Boiardi served at his Cleveland restaurant, Il Giardino d'Italia, became so great that, by 1938, he was marketing the stuff with the phonetic spelling of his name: *Boy-ar-dee*.

It is too simple to say that chefs are inherently fame-seekers, though. Take the example of Ferran Adrià, chef of El Bulli restaurant in Roses, on the Costa Brava, Catalonia. The chef's name has become synonymous with an experimental approach to food, specifically with the flavorful "foams" he created in the mid-'90s. Once discovered by the mainstream press, El Bulli, which is open only from April to September each year, became first a cult destination for foodies and then a kind of benchmark stop for arrivistes of all stripes. By his own admission, Adrià didn't seek to become famous when he began concocting his foams, and, indeed, how could he have possibly foreseen the ways in which the idea would be bastardized in restaurants all over the world? In the chef's defense, he could scarcely have chosen a more obscure location to showcase his food or opted to highlight a weirder phenomenon than infusing puffs of air with flavor. Adrià's fame came as a result of his style, not by his intention.

NO, THE PROBLEM is that the definition of what it means to be a chef has gotten lost in the floodlights. A couple of years ago, while reporting a story about a cooking contest in Sweden, I had the chance to meet a group of wildly talented—in the technical sense—Swedish chefs. They competed against each other like professional athletes do, training for months, engaging in vigorous physical workouts before cooking, shaving their heads in displays of team solidarity. They were the only people I'd ever seen who seemed to cook without much emotion but with tremendous drive. I asked the chef Marcus Samuelsson, a Swede who owns two restaurants in New York City, about this phenomenon: Why was it all about winning for these guys? He replied that once, very early in his career, the legendary French chef Alain Sailhac—now a dean at the French Culinary Institute whose resumé includes earning a four-star review from *The New York Times* for his cooking at Le Cygne restaurant in the late '70s—told him something powerful: A good chef has to love to serve. Samuelsson explained that, for all their drive and intensity, these Swedish chefs were nearly all from upper-middle-class families; they weren't trained in conditions in which caring about customers' reactions to their cooking was paramount, and, as a result, they approached

DAVID COWLES

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their jobs like athletes instead of like craftspeople. The culture was about achievement, not service.

I think it's great that kids in America want to grow up to be chefs, but I also think Sailhac is right: Cooking is inherently a service profession. Good cooks care what their diners think, they care what their underlings think, and they care most about the quality of the food they put on the table. By definition, they are people who are the opposite of beyond reproach. Somewhere along the way, though, it seems that fame has become more important than catering to customers.

I asked Colman Andrews, one of the founders and the current editor-in-chief of *Saveur* magazine (and my former boss), about this. The problem, according to Andrews, is that "the culture of fame and celebrity" has invaded the kitchen. Nowadays, in culinary institutions around the country, students all say they want to have careers in food. The problem is that the career to which they specifically aspire is something that doesn't really exist: "television chef." "It reminds me of a friend I had who used to say that he wanted to be a saint. I told him I didn't think you could just become a saint: I'm pretty sure you have to have been something else first—a fisherman, a nun, you get the idea," Andrews says.

Can you blame these young guns for getting the wrong idea? Not if you've turned on the tube lately. Here's "Top Chef" on Bravo, in which wannabes compete for a $100,000 prize and a chance to appear in a feature story in *Food & Wine* magazine. Here's "The Next Food Network Star," whose finale airs on the Food Network this week, with amateurs vying for the chance to jump directly onto their own soundstages. And here's Bobby Flay on "Iron Chef America," mounting kitchen counters with the same reckless abandon that rockers have when hurling their bodies into mosh pits, moving his arms to the ceiling in the raise-the-roof gesture demonstrated nightly by NBA showboaters like Vince Carter. These exuberant antics, which have nothing to do with the preparation of food, make it easy to forget that Flay was once a chef who actually cooked in a restaurant.

Flay is hardly the only chef who seems to relish stardom over stove time these days, and he's also far from the worst offender. Vying for that title is London chef Gordon Ramsay. Ramsay's credentials are by-the-book impressive: His eponymous flagship restaurant—he owns several in Britain—has earned three stars, the highest rating possible in an incredibly competitive market, from the *Michelin Red Guide*. Ramsay was already a TV star on his own shores, but then Fox aired his reality show competition, "Hell's Kitchen," last year. This was a perfect vehicle for Ramsay, highlighting his most famous accomplishment. Nope, not his food: his temper. Having risen through the ranks under the notoriously difficult-to-work-for British chef Marco Pierre White, Ramsay seemed intent on dishing out as much cruelty onto his underlings as was clearly heaped on him in his early days. A big blond brute of a former soccer player, Ramsay smashes what he deems inadequate dishes onto the fronts of chefs' jackets; he calls an overweight chef an "overgrown muffin" and a group of noisy female diners "bimbos." The "f" word is used so frequently that, back on his native turf, Ramsay has actually just premiered an entire new series called just that—"The 'F' Word." So much for decorum, but who cares? Ramsay is a household name in a country where he doesn't even own a restaurant.

THE ME-ME-ME madness is obviously antithetical to the idea of a service profession; additionally, it's the opposite of what "cooking on television" started out as. Take a look at Julia Child's set kitchen, which was donated in its entirety to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in 2001 and is on permanent exhibition. Child's kitchen is not only a replica of a typical American home kitchen circa 1962, when her first program, "The French Chef," aired. The 14-by-20-foot room really *was* its star's own Cambridge, Massachusetts, cooking space—it has a junk drawer and a countertop telephone, and the stove is what Child called her "big Garland"—a used, six-burner restaurant stove bought for $429 in 1956. Today's chefs cook on sets decorated with state-of-the-art stainless steel equipment including $20,000 ice-cream makers; Emeril even has his own house funk band. Child had guests on her show like the famed French chef Jacques Pepin; Emeril has guests on his show like the famed Aerosmith guitarist Joe Perry.

The truth here, though, is that aping a rock star, or even just hanging out with one, isn't the only goal. Andrews points out that, beyond the seeming appeal of TV stardom, young chefs want a chance to exercise intellectual pretension. To wit, Andrews has saved an explanatory note he received enclosed in a box of new-wave chocolates (the kind filled with things like green pea and nutmeg ganache): "We are part of a growing group of international chefs that view science and psychology as an integral part of a modern food experience. This scientific approach is based on a new discipline called Molecular Gastronomy or the application of scientific principles and techniques for the understanding and improvements of small-scale artisan food production. ... We highly value the cognitive or brain based aspect of eating and perceiving food through multi-sensory stimulation, especially with intense flavors and powerful aromas," it reads. "Well, excuse me for just, you know, throwing a steak on the grill or something," Andrews says.

Amen. Dinner in a lot of "destination restaurants" in the United States these days feels a lot less like a birthday or anniversary splurge and a lot more like a job interview. Diners used to think restaurants were lucky to get their business; now they feel as if they have to tote around culinary resumés to prove they're good enough to occupy the tables ("eaten at the French Laundry two times in the past year and at Nobu eight times in the last five, including the London outpost"). Those of us who don't like it? Well, we probably aren't worthy. ■

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Is Al Jazeera the next PBS?

Coming to America

BY SPENCER ACKERMAN

It took Dave Marash about four years as a Washington anchor to become disgusted with the pandering, the triviality, and the sensationalism of TV news. Marash was a paragon of seriousness, as his bearded chin and intense eyes announced to even casual viewers of WRC-TV, Washington's local NBC affiliate, and, by 1989, he was fed up. Eight months before the FBI would discover Mayor Marion Barry smoking crack in the Vista International Hotel, Marash concluded in frustration to *The Washington Post* that scandal-mongering had created "an infatuation with what the mayor may or may not put up his nose rather than how he spends his day—the administration of his damn government, which is a shambles." So, in June, he left WRC for arguably the most serious show in network journalism: ABC's "Nightline." It was a perfect match: There, Marash would spend 16 years reporting on human rights abuses in Burma, ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and AIDS in Zimbabwe. "Nightline" was a place where Marash could spotlight America's working poor in the midst of the stock market boom and conclude earnestly, "For those near the bottom, this is a world of constantly threatening hunger and recurring poverty." It's that sort of gravitas Marash intends to bring to his next job: Washington anchor for the new, English-language version of Al Jazeera.

It's safe to say most Americans don't exactly associate Al Jazeera with Marash's brand of journalistic integrity. If anything, they associate it with the vile demagoguery of on-air personalities like Youssef Al Qaradawi, a wizened sheik who hosts an opinion show called "Sharia and Life," which he has used as a platform to defend suicide bombings against Israelis and attacks on Americans in Iraq. (To wit: "[A]ll Iraqis should stand together in one rank to resist the occupation. ... Others should also help [the insurgency] with funds and weapons, in spirit through prayers, and in any way possible.") In September, a Spanish court actually convicted one of Al Jazeera's most enterprising reporters of collaborating with Al Qaeda, and one of its cameramen has spent the last four years in Guantánamo Bay, bolstering the American perception that Al Jazeera is little more than a megaphone for Osama bin Laden. (Al Jazeera insists that its staffers have been railroaded.) That may be why, as the *Daily Mirror* reported in November, President Bush toyed with the idea of bombing Al Jazeera's Doha headquarters—an accusation that would have had all the credibility of the U.K. scandal sheet that aired it, had the United States not also (accidentally, of course) bombed Al Jazeera's bureaus in Afghanistan and Iraq.

So it's hardly surprising that Al Jazeera's decision to launch an English-language broadcast has been greeted in the United States with something approaching horror. In fact, although Al Jazeera International (AJI) is scheduled to begin broadcasting at the end of the spring, not a single U.S. cable or satellite provider has yet agreed to carry it. But its reporters and managers stress that the network intends to be a wholly different sort of enterprise—they're not *that* Al Jazeera. Far from ardent sermons on the application of Islamic law in everyday life delivered by clerics in keffiyehs, Al Jazeera's international sibling plans to present a cosmopolitan, Jim Lehrer–esque vision of TV news—a goal that has many of the channel's Arab loyalists feeling betrayed. Indeed, Marash doesn't see his joining AJI as a departure from his work at "Nightline," but rather as an extension of it. He and his AJI colleagues—the channel has recruited heavies like BBC eminence David Frost and Riz Khan of CNN—lament the superficiality of the mainstream press and ask: When was the last time you were treated to a nuanced, lengthy broadcast on, say, Latin America? "What I'm striving for," Marash explains, "is news at the speed of thought."

That might gain you plaudits at the Columbia School of Journalism, but the experiment is bound to have political fallout. The viewership that Marash describes is going to be wealthy, elite, and, in all probability, liberal. And, if liberals think they're politically marginalized now as being soft on terrorism, just imagine if they begin stuffing their latest issue of *The New York Review of Books* into a tote bag from Al Jazeera International. What happens when liberal pundits start appearing on an offshoot of what a staffer once lamented is considered "Al Jazeera, comma, Osama bin Laden's mouthpiece, comma"?

Al Jazeera's first decade has been an unbelievable success. Begun in 1996 as a nonhydrocarbon investment in the future by the young emir of Qatar, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, the satellite channel quickly earned a reputation for airing perspectives that went far beyond what Middle Eastern information ministries considered acceptable. On chat shows like the wildly popular "Opposite Direction," the predominant viewpoint is far more likely to be theocratic than liberal. But Al Jazeera created a space where Arabs could argue heatedly about their prevailing social, political, and religious order instead of having their opinions repressed. Hosni Mubarak paid the network the ultimate backhanded compliment during a tour of its cramped studios in 2000 by exclaiming, "All this trouble from a matchbox like this!" It's estimated that

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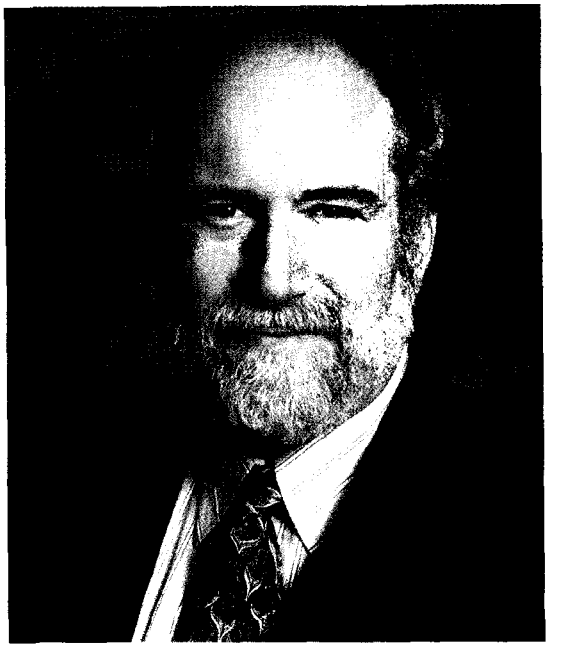
Al Jazeera has as many as 50 million daily viewers in what, before it appeared on the scene, was among the most moribund media cultures on the planet.

That has never been enough. As early as 1998, Al Jazeera execs began toying with the idea of going global. But it was only after September 11 made Al Jazeera the most important news organization on earth—no other network had a Kabul bureau, let alone a post-attack interview with bin Laden—that expanding to an English-language format appeared realistic. By 2002, many at the network had concluded that broadcasting in English was nothing less than an obligation rooted in Al Jazeera's original mission as "the first channel in the history of broadcasting to tell the Arabic and Islamic perspective to the Western people," as one proud London bureau staffer put it to author Hugh Miles. But expansion also became a corporate imperative: As both a media and an Arab phenomenon, Al Jazeera felt it ought to be the equal of CNN and the BBC, both of which have strong international presences. Last year, it announced the hiring of top management and news staff for an English-language spinoff and ambitiously promised to launch in 2006.



Dave Marash: The new face of Al Jazeera?

As soon as planning for the new channel started, however, it became clear how brand expansion and brand integrity can pull in, well, opposite directions. Al Jazeera's mission might have dictated that AJI simply be an English language version of the original—a translation that presented the United States and Europe with an unadulterated view of the Arab world. Indeed, many Arab journalists I spoke with at Al Jazeera's 2004 world media forum in Doha emphasized to me their desire to "talk back" to Western media about the Middle East. Al Jazeera's then–communications director, Jihad Ali Ballout, confidently promised me that "the content will be the same" as in Arabic. But the interest of the global corporation that Al Jazeera had become was another matter. In interviews with AJI staffers—and in their promotional materials—a conspicuously recurring subject is Al Jazeera's ranking as the fifth most recognizable brand in the world. To many at Al Jazeera, the best way of growing the brand and increasing its prestige is to pursue an international audience. "We are trying to reposition Al Jazeera as a global channel and not a pan-Arab channel," Marketing Director Ali Mohammed Kamal told *The Times* of London in November 2002. "A lot of people watch the BBC or CNN as a credible source of news. We are trying to dent this credibility and relaunch as a more international channel."

That means Al Jazeera International will bear little resemblance to its parent network. "Al Jazeera in Arabic—obviously it's a service by, for, and of Arabic speakers, mostly a Muslim and mostly a Middle Eastern audience. It reflects their point of view," Marash explains from the conference room of 1627 K Street, where, on the fourth floor, AJI's studios are still under construction. "Al Jazeera International's structure and composition is independent. In terms of staff, and editorially, we're independent from them. We're an English-language news service with a global audience—a broader palate, a broader mandate, and a more diverse clientele." Over the course of 24 hours, AJI will broadcast from four hubs around the world ("semi-autonomous republics," in one AJI staffer's phrase): from Kuala Lumpur for four hours, Doha for eleven, London for five, and Washington for four, according to current planning. Each hub will view the events of the day "with the assumptions and culture of their regional bases." For example, on the morning of our interview, *The Washington Post* ran a front-page story about a new poll reporting rising American hostility toward Muslims. AJI's four different hubs would present a story like that in terms of its implications for the Pacific Rim or the Persian Gulf or transatlantic unity, as well as explain the U.S. perspective, thereby aspiring to give "a 24-hour-day kaleidoscope of views." To the enthusiastic Marash, it's a paradigm shift: the creation of the world's first truly cosmopolitan media landscape, the town square of a global village that's open, accessible, and yet familiar to any English speaker, "rather than Turner's God's-eye view or Murdoch's Fox/Sky national view of the world. That is the mission."

If that sounds high-minded—even a little pretentious—Marash and his colleagues offer no apologies. Al Jazeera's calling card is to aggressively challenge the cultural assumptions of their rivals about the Arab world. AJI's will be to challenge their competitors' intellect. "I want to slow things down from the traditional pace of cable news and provide more depth, more nuance, more sophistication. I want to do *fewer* stories," Marash says. For AJI Washington's hourlong broadcast at 7 p.m., Marash envisions up to three central stories, each reported for five to seven minutes and then amplified by expert interviews and discussion: "It'll be news as if it mattered, to give an understanding of complex events. ... We want to slow down and intensify what we do." Joanne Levine, the Washington bureau's executive producer for programming and a fellow "Nightline" refugee,

ABC News

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intends to make long-form documentaries a central aspect of AJI's Americas lineup—far from the chat-show format that forms the backbone of Al Jazeera or the often superficial foreign affairs coverage offered by their Western competitors. "We're striving for good storytelling," she says, "not to be deliberately provocative for a show's sake." Levine is the rare TV journalist whose eyes widen as she promises, "We're going to *own* Latin America. When was the last time you saw a good, in-depth story on Latin America, other than on [Hugo] Chávez?"

OF COURSE, THE question presumes that a viewer even knows who Chávez is. But those who don't aren't really the sort AJI is interested in attracting. Nigel Parsons, AJI's Doha-based managing director, and other AJI executives have stated that their true target audience is the millions of Muslims worldwide who don't speak Arabic—perhaps as a way of lowering expectations for AJI's U.S. performance—but Marash and Levine believe that there's an unserved news audience in the United States that's lying in wait for something like AJI. What Fox News did for gun owners and evangelicals who felt culturally alienated and politically marginalized by CNN, AJI hopes to do for English professors and software developers disgusted by both networks. "A lot of people are dissatisfied with the so-called mainstream media, and they'll sample us," Marash predicts. Like who? "When you're abroad, you buy and read *The International Herald Tribune*. Here, you read *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*. You're a regular reader of THE NEW REPUBLIC. Probably the same itch that makes you exercise your brain on dense, serious news organs will make you watch us."

That audience is boutique, elite, and, in all likelihood, politically liberal. Marash contends that the operative factor leading a viewer to check out AJI is disgust with the press, which cuts across ideological affiliation. "I think a lot of the Fox News audience is our audience. Anyone with a lot of dissatisfaction with the present will sample us," if for no other reason than what Marash calls "bear-baiting"—that is, sampling a network perceived to be anti-American in order to get offended. But, under Marash and Levine's intended direction, AJI will eschew the inflammatory Al Jazeera style for a more textured, if relatively soporific, tone. Anyone tuning in to jeer at a defense of suicide bombers is going to be disappointed. Accordingly, Hugh Miles writes in his recent biography of the network that Al Jazeera staffers consider their best opportunity in the United States to be filling "a vacancy at the liberal end of the [media] spectrum." Marash doesn't exactly disagree. "We'll get some of the same audience that Air America gets," he says. "Left of center, but dissatisfied with the [media] status quo."

To call this a dream come true for the right might be an understatement. In 2004, Al Jazeera wasn't even allowed to hang its banner at the Democratic National Convention for fear of invoking any attack-ad-ready association between Democrats and the controversial news channel. Now, AJI risks putting both itself and the liberals who'd watch its fare or appear on its shows in an arguably more precarious cultural position: carrying all the taint of a perceived association with terrorism—however groundless—along with an editorial vision that's unapologetically elite and cosmopolitan. Even if AJI's quality control is as high as Marash and Levine suggest, AJI is unlikely to escape a toxic political stigma that liberals *really* don't want associated with them. Indeed, Marash's rarified defense of Al Jazeera proper is catnip for the right: "[Al Jazeera's] idea is that an argument is only defeated by a better argument. Hate speech is matched with moderate views," he enthuses. "The real philosophy of Al Jazeera in Arabic is that the best disinfectant is sunlight. ... That's not only the right choice, but it's the traditional choice of American journalism."

That may be, but already conservatives are treating AJI's high-profile Western hires as Islamofascist quislings. When AJI was in talks with Frost to sign him for one of its shows, Fox News's John Gibson sneered, "That's a little like one of the royal family consorting with the [July 7 London] bombers, isn't it?" Marash, who used to work with Bill O'Reilly in local news in New York City, appeared on "The O'Reilly Factor" in January only to have his segment premised with O'Reilly's note to viewers, "As you may know, the television network Al Jazeera has a close-knit relationship with Al Qaeda and other Islamic terror outfits." While Marash held his own against his former colleague—O'Reilly ended by offering what passed for an olive branch: "Maybe you can clean that place up"—his AJI confederate Josh Rushing wasn't as lucky against Sean Hannity. Claiming bewilderment over how Rushing "in good conscience could work for a network like this," an indignant Hannity demanded Rushing affirm that "we're the greatest country on earth." (He did.) And, after Rushing extended an invitation to the Fox host to appear on AJI, Hannity spewed, "I have no intention of going on Al Jazeera, period, to put American troops in jeopardy."

In short, liberals who just want to see a good, in-depth story on Latin America are in for a barrage of accusations that they share news-watching habits with Osama bin Laden. Rushing offers a good case in point. In 2003, he was a Marine lieutenant and U.S. Central Command public affairs officer responsible for handling Al Jazeera's reporters in Doha during the invasion of Iraq. Viewers of *Control Room*, Jehane Noujaim's 2004 documentary about Al Jazeera, saw Rushing's perspective about the network evolve from wariness to understanding to sympathy—an evolution that ultimately led Rushing out of the military and into a new career with AJI. As much as Rushing believes that AJI will spur the "dissipation of the controversial part of the brand," during his hiring talks with Parsons, he worried that an American audience would never accept AJI's association with Al Jazeera, which would overshadow any quality journalism the new network produces. "We were having lunch, and I said, 'You know, we should really consider just changing the

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name of the network. It's just such a powerful thing here in America, even if what they believe about it isn't true,' " Rushing recalls. Rushing now says it would have been a horrible idea—"you look disingenuous, like you're trying to hide something"—but he had a point. When he appeared on "Hannity & Colmes," the show ran an image of him in his Marine uniform with the caption: TRAITOR?

AMERICAN CONSERVATIVES MIGHT consider AJI's Western hires borderline traitors. But a more genuine—and vitriolic—reaction against AJI has come not from those who hate Al Jazeera but from those who love it. AJI has spent months attempting to placate Westerners wary of inviting bin Laden TV into their living rooms, filling the newspapers with reassuring quotes about AJI's professionalism and gravitas. Frost told *The New York Times Magazine* in February, "When viewers watch Al Jazeera International, they will be closer to watching CNN." Westerners might react with disbelief, but, in the Arab world, quotes like Frost's have been considered AJI's dead-serious statement of intent. That, in turn, has prompted tension that AJI will jeopardize the Al Jazeera they know and trust. Even as Al Jazeera has reaped criticism in the Middle East for airing the region's dirty social and political laundry, many of its millions of viewers consider it an authentic reflection of Arab identity—"not just a TV station," Managing Director Wadah Khanfar once told the *Guardian*, but "something people are very attached to."

To them, the prospect that AJI—led by a team heavy with Westerners—would reinvent the Al Jazeera brand strikes some as another example of the West besieging the Middle East. The first Al Jazeera world media forum featured Arab, South Asian, and African journalists lining up in front of the microphones in the ballroom of the InterContinental Doha to genuflect before Al Jazeera's representatives, whom they praised as paragons of an authentic Third World press. According to attendees, this year's forum, in February, was marked by anxiety over whether AJI will be just another Western news network. A new blog, *Friends of Al Jazeera*, has launched a relentless and often scurrilous counterattack on AJI's Western management as "mediocre people who have lied about their importance at the BBC and CNN on their CVs swanning around the Ritz," according to one recent post. The site's bloggers, who simply refer to themselves as "a group of media activists from around the world"—and who didn't return my e-mails seeking comment—also aren't above sliming AJI staffers as "Israel-apologists." Al Jazeera staffers may not be as caustic, but their skepticism of AJI is no less intense. "There is a widespread feeling that they are going to be Al Jazeera only in name, judging by the attitudes of some of its anchors and officials," explains one prominent Al Jazeera journalist. "Sadly, some of them give you the impression that they want to disown Al Jazeera." The dismay among Al Jazeera's Arab staff is so great that, last month, the company's chairman, Sheik Hamad bin Thamer Al Thani, tapped Khanfar to "improve integration" between the networks. (Neither Khanfar, Parsons, nor other top AJI brass granted me an interview.)

Arabs aren't the only ones who want AJI to reflect Al Jazeera. In a recently published book titled *Voices of the New Arab Public*, Williams College Professor Marc Lynch argues that Al Jazeera has constructively shattered the prevailing Arab political consensus, with its freewheeling and often inflammatory guests presenting viewers every day with televised examples of how democratization can mean both deliverance and demagoguery. He traveled to Doha for the February forum and pleaded his case to Parsons directly that the world needed to see and hear the same debate that Al Jazeera frames for the Arab world. "I told Nigel, look, you can't run away from the controversy. You're Al Jazeera—controversy finds you. It doesn't matter how many times you hire people like David Frost," Lynch says.

Lynch would prefer something closer to a direct translation of Al Jazeera's Arabic content into English: "That would be great. It would infuriate a lot of people." After the initial shock of watching an intense septuagenarian preacher like Qaradawi deliver strict religious instructions for day-to-day living, however, Lynch anticipates a far more important secondary shock: one over "how similar the debates are to the arguments here: What does democracy mean? What is Al Qaeda?" In February, for example, a Syrian-born Californian named Wafa Sultan contended on Al Jazeera to an outraged cleric that Islam was a backward religion. A clip of the debate, subtitled in English, circulated around the Internet, attracting overwhelming praise from right-wing blogs—one wrote that Sultan "did the unthinkable: She appeared on Arab television and condemned Islam"—and resulted in a front-page *New York Times* profile. To Lynch, however, seeing people surprised that Al Jazeera would air an incendiary exchange between a secularist and an Islamist was nothing short of bizarre—that's what Al Jazeera does all the time. ("Just the other day, I had *exactly* the same kind of experience," Lynch quipped on his blog, *Abu Aardvark*. "I was watching TV, and I couldn't believe my eyes, and I said 'wow, did you just see LeBron James dunk? A *dunk!* In the *NBA!* Can you believe it?' ")

Such misunderstandings show that, even as the United States adopts democratization of the Middle East as a core aspect of its strategy for the war on terrorism, the people allegedly being democratized remain an abstraction, or worse. That's why, says Lynch, "even a toned-down Al Jazeera would be useful. A lot of Americans respond to fantasies of what the Arab press is. ... It's not just presenting the extremists. There's a whole world out there. Let them talk about the things that matter." That's what Marash and Levine have attempted for their entire careers, and it's why they went to AJI. Too bad they risk being viewed as cultural bloodsuckers by the Arab world, terrorist sympathizers by the American right, and a potential albatross by the American left. Marash may have escaped the sensationalism of local TV news, but he may be about to experience something much more professionally painful. ■

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BOOKS & THE ARTS

STANLEY KAUFFMANN ON FILMS

Looking at Women

NICOLE HOLOFCENER WAS born in 1960, so she is about the same age as most of the characters in **FRIENDS WITH MONEY**. This is the third film that she has written and directed: her first was *Walking and Talking*, which was admirable, and her second was *Lovely and Amazing*, which I missed. Her new film is extraordinary: it engages us from beginning to end without strong narrative, or narratives. It lives through the quality of Holofcener's dialogue and the performances that she has drawn from her actors.

FRIENDS WITH MONEY
(Sony Pictures Classics)

THREE TIMES
(IFC Films)

With most films, it is easy to imagine that the writer got an idea for a story, then sat down to work it out. In this film, however, there is no central plot idea. Holofcener just wrote about some people she knows or knows about, presenting their lives and letting the plot chips, if any, fall where they might. Things do happen in her picture: the people don't merely sit and talk. But the nub of it is that the happenings are less interesting than the people. This is hardly a new approach. (Predecessors, in a way: *Laurel Canyon*, *The First Wives' Club*, *The Big Chill*.) But it is a tough method to sustain, and Holofcener does it without breathing hard.

The biggest of the difficulties, especially if the writer happens to be as witty as Holofcener, is to write dialogue that crackles without making us wonder how the characters thought up all those funny things they say. When I saw Neil Simon's plays—and laughed—I used to wonder who wrote these people's material for them. With Holofcener, this is not a problem. Her people are all smart enough and articulate enough to speak "spontaneously" as they do. For instance, a woman who had a poorly paid teaching job says that she "quit when the kids started giving me quarters." It is her line, not the screenwriter's.

This former teacher, Olivia (played by Jennifer Aniston), the youngest of the group, is the only friend without money and is now working as a maid. There are three others, all married, all well-off. Christine (Catherine Keener) writes screenplays with her husband; Jane (Frances McDormand) is a clothing designer; Franny (Joan Cusack) is, classically, just rich. All four live in the Los Angeles area and have known one another so long that when they get together, in pairs or trios or quartets, they seem to be resuming conversation. Each knows the others' weak spots and hits them or not according to how much love she is feeling at the moment.

Holofcener gives each of the women some sort of story motion without making a big deal of it. Christine, who spends her days sitting opposite her collaborator husband, each with a laptop at the ready, has a professional quarrel with him that alters their relationship. Olivia becomes entangled with a man who says he is unemployed and is telling the truth, but for an unexpected reason. Sex, which apparently has reached Southern California, is of course immediate in their talk and lives. (To spice things further and to keep matters up to date, Jane suspects that her husband is gay.)

Aniston is just aggressively defensive enough about her housecleaning to increase her allure. One sequence in which, while she works, she puts on a burlesque French maid's outfit that her boyfriend brought her, is a diversion in the comfortably kinky. McDormand, who seems incapable of a false move or note in her acting, has a spat scene at a supermarket checkout that subtly crystallizes several social difficulties. Cusack has the least demanding role, and thus, for a change, she can handle it adequately. Keener, who has now been in all of Holofcener's films, continues to develop the remarkable talent that she showed from the start.

One more bow to Holofcener. Imagine the job that she chose to load herself with—trying to pitch this film to a possible producer. What would she say? "This is a picture about moneyed women today, with one of them nonrich for contrast, and how they chat and live." What would be the producer's response? Or try this one: "This film, though it has no special excitement or suspense, provides a slice of contemporary bourgeois life that will be valuable to social historians a hundred years from now." Both pitches are true; and if Holofcener actually used one or the other, she is all the more gifted.

A film on a related subject comes from the warmly esteemed Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-Hsien. His latest work, **THREE TIMES**, written by his usual collaborator, Chu Tien-Wen, gives us examples of Chinese man-woman relations in three periods: 1966, 1911, and 2005. Obviously the man and the woman are different in the three scenes, but they are played by the same two actors.

The 1966 story opens in a billiard parlor (the billiard table mysteriously converts to a pool table later on). The woman works there as an attendant; the man is a billiard player. People are still traditionally formal in their behavior, but they wear Western clothes. A further hint of pending change: a radio is on, and we hear "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" in English. The man is attracted to the woman, but he does no more than tell her that he has been drafted into the army and will write to her. He does; but when he comes back on leave, he finds that she has moved elsewhere. He tracks her down, and eventually presumes to hold her hand.

The 1911 section is treated like a silent film. Although there is music throughout, the dialogue, unheard, is printed on

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each shot—in Chinese, naturally. (The English subtitles are tacked below.) The costumes are traditional Chinese, and the man wears a pigtail. He has a complicated relationship with the woman, who here is in a brothel. The 2005 sequence opens with the pair whizzing along on a motorcycle through a modern city. (Many of the shop signs and outdoor ads are in English.) The man and the woman are lovers: at one point they have an open-mouthed kiss. Further to update matters, the woman is also having a lesbian affair.

The film's trouble is in what happens in each section: not enough. Once the atmosphere of each period is established, the story is too weak to interest—and the characterizations are too thin to compensate. Hou is obviously a skilled and confident director, but forty minutes or so in each of these sections is more than is needed to make his point—about the status of women at the time and the behavior toward them of men. Perhaps, for a Chinese audience, the dialogue helps—as it does with Holofcener's mildly plotted film. ■

James Wood

The Misreader

JESUS AND YAHWEH: THE NAMES DIVINE
By Harold Bloom
(Riverhead Books, 256 pp., $24.95)

I.

THERE ARE CERTAIN WRITERS, such as Garry Wills and John Updike, who seem to aspire to a state of continuous publication, as if their readership were constantly reviewing them for tenure. Harold Bloom has been among their number since 1990, when he aimed *The Book of J* at a general readership. It is admirable to want to write criticism for someone other than one's colleagues and graduate students, and Bloom's intelligence, erudition, and charm have made him America's best-known man of letters. Some of that recent work has earned its favor: *The Western Canon* and *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* are rich works of popular criticism.

But the cost of belonging to that army for whom the pen is mightier than the wrist (to adapt Housman) has been large, too. There have been twelve books since 1990, which means a book roughly every sixteen months. (Updike is well ahead, at twenty books since 1990, which corresponds to a book about every nine months or so.) The only way to conduct this kind of permanent revolution of print is to have the word factories ablaze all day and night, and to relish the inevitable duplication and mass production. Thus Updike repackages his writing by collecting his early stories, or by squeezing every last emission of his journalistic work into hardcovers, or by writing fiction that, figuratively speaking, repeats itself. (*Villages*, which appeared two years ago, is at times almost indistinguishable from at least four or five earlier fictions.)

Bloom's way is to repeat himself by variation, rather like the custom, in traditional societies, of adding another floor to the house when the family grows. Thus his Shakespeare book essentially repeats and expands on the Shakespeare chapter in *The Western Canon*, while *How to Read and Why* also borrows heavily from *The Western Canon*. An introduction to Edith Grossman's new translation of *Don Quixote* just rephrases the Cervantes chapter from *The Western Canon*, and so on. *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* was little more than an anthology of the rather left-handed introductions Bloom has been writing over the years for his Chelsea House collections—books of essays about canonical authors, assembled by diligent research assistants, and topped by Bloom's princely prefaces, which have the air of a fatherly send-off and pat on the head, the affection of the pat depending on Bloom's decision about exactly how "strong" is the author under consideration.

As Bloom has settled into this second career, so his old virtues have gradually fallen from him. An extraordinary amount of the work of the last decade is luxurious with padding and superfluity; there is hardly a book of his that would not have been better off as an essay. He is not a critic anymore, but a populist appreciator; the close readings of poems, sometimes thrilling in their originality, that characterized books such as *The Anxiety of Influence* and *Agon* have been replaced by a peculiar combination of character-psychologizing and canonical divination, producing that familiar Bloomian sentence, which is always adding superfluous codas to itself, and in which three or four favored authors are tossed around in an approving oil and coated with the substance of their creations: "Only Don Quixote can rival the fat knight, Sir John Falstaff, and even Emerson at his strongest—stronger, here, even than his belated rival, Nietzsche—is not quite a match for his ultimate precursor, J's Yahweh, though I concede that the greatest Jewish genius after Jesus, Sigmund Freud, would not have agreed with my heretical opinion." (That is a parody, but I can provide excellent originals.)

Above all, for Bloom, writers must be ranked, and the greatness of the very greatest asserted again and again. Moreover, all great writers are essentially alike. Bloom is indubitably a fine Shakespearean critic, but he has strayed very far from Kent's threat in *King Lear*: "I'll teach you differences." Instead, he teaches us samenesses. For him, literature has become an enormous family tree, in which genetically similar generations quarrel and make up and die, and hand on their majestic and generally Oedipal DNA to their offspring.

VATIC, REPETITIOUS, IMPRECISELY reverential, though never without a peculiar charm of his own—a kind of campiness, in fact—Bloom as a literary critic in the last few years has been largely unimportant. But in one area he has remained interesting: on the question of religion, and American religion in particular. *The Book of J*—which argues that the most lively and grand narrative strand of the Pentateuch, the one by the so-called J writer, centrally concerned with the representation of Yahweh, was probably written by a woman—was not taken seriously by biblical scholars or by ancient historians, but it is vivid nonetheless. Borrowing from the burgeoning study of

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biblical texts as literary texts, it treats Yahweh as a literary creation, the greatest canonical character in literature. It clearly influenced Jack Miles's intriguing *God: A Biography*, a book that has, in turn, made an impact on Bloom's recent religious writing.

The American Religion, which appeared in 1992, was a more significant and unexpected work. In it, Bloom argues that American Christianity is neither very biblical nor very theological. He focuses particularly on Mormonism and on the Southern Baptists, though he also discusses Pentecostalism and Fundamentalism and Christian Scientism. He finds that American Christians emphasize what he calls "a Gnostic knowing of Jesus through direct acquaintance," and that they characterize the self that gets to know Jesus thus as essentially solitary. Like most extreme offshoots of Protestantism, the American sects and churches have shucked off Yahweh as a theological and literary inconvenience (too Jewish, too unpleasant and disobliging, too absent), and have rapturously taken possession of a now strangely Fatherless Jesus Christ, best approached through the Holy Spirit, and most emblematically seen as the Risen Christ. This solitary "knowing" of Jesus—through conversion, salvation, and prayer—is combined, so Bloom argues, with a characteristic American self-love, a belief that the human self possesses elements of the divine.

To Bloom, all this sounds very much like Emerson (he is right) and very much like Gnosticism (he is partly right). Bloom, as he never tires of telling his readers, is a "Gnostic Jew." He uses the adjective with casual elasticity: often it signifies for him any esoteric approach to metaphysical knowledge (*gnosis* is the Greek term for knowledge); at other times, it seems little more than an honorific, bestowed on an approved author who seems to have achieved the necessary "religious" sublimity. Gnosticism is an immensely complex theological and cosmological system, Greek, Jewish, and Christian, that has its roots in an attempt to reconcile God and the existence of evil. To simplify an enormous and very diverse body of writings: Gnosticism deals with the problem of evil by asserting that since matter is evil, God cannot have created the world. There is a true God somewhere beyond the cosmos, but it was a false God, a Demiurge, who created fallen man and the world, either blunderingly or malevolently. This Demiurge is often associated with the Jehovah of the Hebrew Bible. Yet unbeknown to the Demiurge, Sophia infused man's soul with her essence, and so we botched creatures contain within ourselves a divine spark, a *pneuma*.

IT IS THIS DIVINE SPARK THAT seems most to interest Bloom, though he conveniently ignores those Gnostics who believed that most humans had none of this spark and would therefore pass into oblivion. (The recently translated gospel of Judas espouses just such a belief.) For Bloom, this is nothing less than a picture of the almost-divinity of the self—"God and man differ only in degree, not in kind," as he puts it. In Mormonism, he finds a belief system that does indeed look Gnostic. For the Mormons believe that God was a man of flesh and blood who became God, and that humans must progress upward in the same way. The Mormon God can organize the world but cannot create. As Bloom rightly remarks, this disposes of the problem of evil, since God is not culpable for our fallenness. The founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, was much taken with the figure of Enoch, who "walked with God," and who, in some Gnostic accounts, is figured as an angel or even a lesser Yahweh. "The revelation of Enoch," says Bloom, "was made to the Prophet Joseph precisely as it was made to the Kabbalists, to grant unto us a more human God and a more divine man."

The reverence of Bloom's language here can hardly go unnoticed. *The American Religion* is indeed a hymn of praise to Mormonism, and above all to Joseph Smith, "an authentic prophet," one of the great unheralded Americans. Swept up by the sublimity of Smith's gnosis, Bloom ignores much of the nonsense and fraudulence of Mormonism. Or rather, he approves of the nonsense and fraudulence that he can call Gnostic: "I am wholly sympathetic to the achievement of Joseph Smith," he writes. "He was anything but a great writer, but he was a great reader, or creative misreader, of the Bible. Mormonism is a wonderfully strong misprision, or creative misreading, of the early history of the Jews." The God of Joseph Smith, he alleges, "is a daring revival of the God of some of the Kabbalists and Gnostics, prophetic sages who, like Smith himself, asserted that they had returned to the true religion of Yahweh or Jehovah. If Smith was mistaken, then so were they, but I hardly know just what it could mean to say that the Kabbalists or Joseph Smith were mistaken."

The man has got panegyrics, as Mark Twain once said. Gnosticism and Mormonism function, for Bloom, as engines of afflatus, systems of figurative and pictorial hypothesis that boldly voyage beyond the verifiable, the theological, the arguable, even the believable (no back-and-forth about the cultural contexts of Leviticus or earnest legalisms about whether the Resurrection can be proved to have "actually happened"), and which can then enter the magically limitless world of the fictional: that is to say, Gnosticism and Mormonism attain the status of that highest medium, *literature*, beyond which there can be no higher gnosis. Credulity opens its gates and simply moans in submission, as it surges beyond credibility itself.

TO BE FAIR, BLOOM IS SURELY right about the Gnostic and esoteric elements of Mormonism. He is much less convincing when discussing orthodox, if charismatic, branches of Protestantism such as Baptism and Pentecostalism. He overasserts the extent to which these forms of Christianity have removed Yahweh from their idea of Christ. (I was tortured, in my evangelical childhood, with a song whose vilely mnemonic refrain was "Your way, not my way, Yahweh.") And though he tries very hard, he is unpersuasive when arguing that the Southern Baptists believe that humans have a piece of Jesus already within them and are thus Gnostic. Despite his lengthy discussion of the Baptist idea of "soul competency," he marshals absolutely no evidence for the Gnosticism of the Baptists (soul competency sounds like little more than soul preparation) and proceeds instead by crafty elision:

> The Baptist experience of knowing Jesus, in a solitary and renewable encounter, takes priority over public worship doctrine, or acts of charity. And since what can know Jesus, in some way already is akin to Jesus, then the saved Baptist participates *now* in the Resurrection and the Life.... Creator and creature are indistinguishable, and the dualism of body and soul is abrogated, so that the Baptist mystic already

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knows what it is to have been resurrected.

"And since what can know Jesus, in some way already is akin to Jesus": that "in some way" is having to do a great deal of work in Bloom's sentence. He surely knows that there is an enormous difference, in Christian charismatic or mystic encounter, between participating in the experience of God (or Jesus) and becoming God or Jesus. It could hardly be a precondition for one's salvation by Christ that one already *is* Christ. Then there would be no need for Christ himself.

II.

WHICH MAY BE BLOOM'S hope. His new book is, among other things, a powerful complaint against the New Testament, and against the version of Christ that the church has detached from the revolutionary Jewish teacher who roams through the canonical Gospel accounts. In a quieter key, it launches a similar complaint against the Yahweh of rabbinic tradition, which, in Bloom's eyes, has similarly detached Yahweh from the impossible, near-human, endlessly complex, Lear-like figure of the Hebrew Bible. *Jesus and Yahweh* is thus a variation on *The American Religion*, and it reverts to the same texts and obsessions. Like that book, it is finally far more at home with Gnostic pictures than with the orthodox theology of tradition, or indeed with theology at all.

Bloom argues that there are three separate figures, who cannot be theologically melded: there is the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible, "a human-all-too-human God"; and there is the historical figure Yeshua of Nazareth, a Jew who never broke with the Covenant; and there is the theological Jesus Christ of Christianity, who has been leached of Jewishness and personality, and who proclaims the good news of a New Covenant. It is impossible, says Bloom, to see how this Yeshua of Nazareth, or in particular this last figure, Jesus Christ, can be the son of Yahweh, the figure he called Abba, or Father, since Jesus and Yahweh have so little in common.

It is not simply that the Incarnation is profoundly un-Jewish; it is that, in a literary sense, Yahweh cannot have changed so utterly that the man worshiped by millions of Christians can also be Yahweh. Either Jesus represents a complete break with the Hebrew Bible, or Yahweh committed suicide on the cross. In one of the most suggestive moments in the book, Bloom reflects on the Yahweh who speaks face-to-face with Moses, and contrasts that deity with the Yahweh, or Abba, who is so peculiarly absent in the New Testament: "Why is it that not once, even according to the Christian Testament, was there any face-to-face confrontation between Yahweh and his Son?... And if Yahweh thus ceases to be Yahweh, what is to be made, then, of a Yahweh Incarnate?"

Theology is to blame. Reacting against the flagrant humanity of both Yahweh and Jesus, it sought to bleed these figures of their (admittedly very different) personalities. The J writer, that great Shakespeare of the Bible, conjured forth a Yahweh too complex and human and messy for theology's narrowness. The J writer "manifested an irreverence that sparked the defensive rise of theology, which is always an effort to explain away the human aspects of God (or of Jesus)." The culprits are Philo of Alexandria and Paul. Philo, a Greek-speaking Jew, Hellenized Christianity, so that Plato's or Plotinus's bodiless God replaces the interventionist warrior of the Torah. Both Philo and Paul wrenched the Hebrew Bible into new spiritual and allegorical configurations. Paul, the most famous Christian Jew after Jesus himself, centers the faith almost obsessively on the spirit—on Christ's resurrection, and on the promise of the spiritual New Covenant, which will conquer death. (Though paradoxically, Paul is also the most Jewish of apostles, keen at every turn—even to the point of violent misreading of the Hebrew Bible—to ground the arrival of the Messiah in what he sees as prophetic Judaism.) Bloom comments, not without justice, that Paul's Yahweh "shrinks to God the Father, and pragmatically has little function except in relation to the Son.... Neither God nor Christ requires personality for Paul, who possesses so much of that quality that he scarcely needed to seek it outside of himself."

IT IS A PITY THAT *JESUS AND Yahweh* is not a dense thirty-page essay. For in order to make a book—the condition of those addicted to continuous publication—Bloom must fatten his thesis. But he has only air for provender. Since he has no interest in the tradition of Jewish or Christian theology, he never quotes from it. Since he disdains much of the New Testament, he would rather confess his bewilderment than examine its sources. He gestures constantly toward the majesty and vividness of J's portrait of Yahweh, but he rarely quotes from it, referring us instead to *The Book of J*. His chapter on Paul, who is supposedly Bloom's arch-antagonist, runs barely to two thousand words, and maunders amid idle speculation:

> Paul is famously eloquent, though more in the English Bible than in the original. Yet he is an obsessed crank, who confuses anyone attempting a dispassionate stance toward him. And he is not truly an innovator or a reformer, but primarily a polemicist who defends a faith to which he has been converted. Neither a villain nor an exemplar, he is a singularly strange genius of synthesis who conceals something evasive in his deepest self. One shrugs off speculations as to his psychosexuality: why does that matter? ... Paul's delusion (what else could you call it?) is that he lives in the End Time. Myself a Gnostic Jew, I cannot pretend to understand Paul, almost two millennia later. Yet who can understand him? ... We know too much about Paul, and I am left baffled by him. He could

The novel

We've all heard about Juanita—poor,
dear woman with her poor, dear woman act
metastasizing like a metaphor
into fact;

that benefactor of Topeka Teens
Making a Difference and the quiet third
shifts he was pulling, sealing smack glassines—
we've all heard,

even Nicole, whose novel never goes
anywhere because she isn't ready
to think the worst of characters she knows
haven't done anything to anybody.

ERIC McHENRY

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be a Shakespearean character, as enigmatic as Hamlet or Iago.

Bloom, in his late pomp, only orates, and so his critical writing now has the flavor of perpetual conclusion, as if each sentence were the slightly unnecessary, slightly rhetorically inflated terminus of its successor. And yet, dispiritingly, this convoy of eternal conclusions stretches out over desert pages! The result is a painful repetitiousness, in which Bloom confronts us again and again with a thesis that might have been compactly handled in ten thousand words:

> Jesus Christ and his putative father, Yahweh, do not seem to be two persons of one substance, but of very different substances indeed.
>
> When I argue, throughout this book, that the theological God, the Jesus-the-Christ of the Gospel of John and subsequent Catholic theology, is clearly irreconcilable with Yahweh ...
>
> I myself, speaking now only as a literary critic, am not persuaded that the Jesus of Matthew or of Luke is truly the Son of God.
>
> A Messiah who is God Incarnate, and dies on the Cross as an Atonement for all human Sin and error, is irreconcilable with the Hebrew Bible.
>
> And if Yahweh thus ceases to be Yahweh, what is to be made, then, of a Yahweh Incarnate?
>
> The paradox of Christianity always will be its conviction that Yahweh, most unsettling of all entities, whether actual or fictive, could in any sense have fathered Jesus of Nazareth, who might have been profoundly disturbed by what latecomers have reworked as his role.
>
> Imagining J's Yahweh as the father of Mark's Jesus baffles my experience of pondering high literature, where fathers and sons diverge but do not exist in different spheres of being.
>
> Judaism is not Christianity's parent. Rather, Judaism and Christianity are enemy brothers ...

III.

THE DIFFICULTY WITH BLOOM'S book, quite apart from its repetitiveness, is that it seems to make theological arguments while being only invested in literary ones. For Bloom, Yahweh is a magnificent literary character, a man-God, a divine human being, the only strong precursor to Shakespeare's Lear and Cervantes's Quixote. (I fear that leaves Prince Myshkin as Jesus's rival.) Since Bloom has no interest in theology, he decides it is nowhere to be found in the Bible. Theology is a Greek import; the Bible is sheer literary presence (and dispiriting absence): "I am incapable of understanding what so many Christian scholars go on calling 'the theology of the Old Testament.' The Tanakh has *no* theology, and Yahweh, to keep repeating the obvious, is not at all a theological God. Theology was invented in Alexandria by the Hellenized Jew Philo, who interpreted the Septuagint as Plotinus construed Plato." This wild overemphasis explains why Bloom does not discuss the Prophets, especially Isaiah; skimps the Psalms; and can only hurl tinny insults at Paul and John: to do any differently would be to admit that there is indeed plenty of theology—ideas and concepts, and not only words and images—in both the Old and New Testaments, and that the biblical story is not merely a great work of literature, a sublime narrative of a character's presence and absence.

But Bloom's real area of interest is the literary, and here he is enormously shadowed—something he concedes—by Jack Miles's two books, *God: A Biography* and *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*. Miles explicitly reads the Old and New Testament as literary narratives, and his books are, in essence, Feuerbachian adventures: what does the God we have created look like as a massive human being, as a literary character? How heroic, how kind, how punitive, how solitary does he seem? Miles is often subtle and provocative, noting, for instance, that God does not speak his own words in the Hebrew Bible after Job, and that he effects a steady withdrawal in the last books. (He reads the Hebrew Bible not as a historical artifact, but as a completed literary text; thus the books after Job are "formally" but not chronologically later.)

Inevitably, Miles sees Jesus's advent as "a crisis in the life of God." Viewed as a single narrative, the Bible is indeed a puzzling tale of self-rescue, a rescue by God from a catastrophe of his own making. "The world is a great crime, and someone must be made to pay for it," Miles writes. "Mythologically read, the New Testament is the story of how someone, the right someone, does pay for it ... in its broadest outlines, the story of the Bible is the story of how God first turned his blessings of fertility and dominion into curses and then after an epic voyage lasting thousands of years, turned his curses back into blessings."

Like Bloom, Miles presses on the notion of Incarnation so that it begins to seem even more peculiar than it already does: "If we grant that Jesus is God incarnate, then we must grant as well that he has the right to announce a deep change in God—which is to say, in himself—without quite calling the change by that name and without otherwise troubling to explain it." The reason for this deep change, argues Miles, is that God had failed to protect Jerusalem from the Romans. But to admit this is impossible: "Instead of baldly declaring that he is unable to defeat his enemies, God may declare that he has no enemies." The deep change, then, by which God changes from being a chosen people's possession into being a universal deity, and from an interventionist warrior into the Holy Spirit of all peoples, "entails an expansion of membership in his covenant."

The great advantage of Miles's work is that it is explicitly a literary experiment, and that he treats the Old and New Testaments as a biographer or a historian of literary characterization, without aesthetic (or philosophical) evaluation. Unlike Bloom, he is not concerned with literary quality as such. But Bloom's book, which is overwhelmed by its need to displace the belated importance of the New Testament, and thus of Christianity, is in fact a theologico-aesthetic reading in which literary argument is always getting confused with the theological, and in which these two elements are further combined with an almost reflexive Jewish distaste for Christianity. Bloom's book is perhaps at its most interesting, if wrongheaded, when it is most angry, and most defensively Jewish. It as if throughout this book Bloom is constantly muttering, like the Emperor Julian, "Thou has conquered, O Galilean!"

It clearly irritates Bloom that Christianity became so important, for it is

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obvious that the New Testament, as a literary text, is not as great as its precursor, the Hebrew Bible. Reading between the lines, there are also at least two other sources of irritation: for a Jew, Christianity's pragmatic success, and its often shameful means of "overpowering" Judaism, are rightly appalling—the forced readings of the Hebrew Bible evident in the New Testament, along with the centuries of political oppression and public and private anti-Semitism. The third goad is the one that Bloom cannot really admit to: that the "success" of the New Testament threatens the theory of reading for which Bloom is best known. The anxiety of influence, too, died on the cross.

In Bloom's system, poets struggle oedipally with the great poets who precede them. Younger poets both love and seek to displace their predecessors. Coming after a great poet—as Milton comes after Shakespeare, or Arnold after Wordsworth—is a source of anxiety, and the strong poet will deal with this anxiety by "strongly misreading" his powerful precursor, so as to deflect some of the pressure of his massive influence. The weak misreader is the poet who succumbs to that anxiety of influence, and produces work that has not swerved powerfully enough away from its influences. All poets "misread" their predecessors, because the reading they do is over-determined by the pressure of their creative needs and anxieties. There can never be any simple, disinterested "reading" of one's poetic ancestors—or not of those with whom one is fated to struggle. We might say, for instance, that Bloom, in his second career, is a strong misreader of Clifton Fadiman, but only a weak misreader of Samuel Johnson.

But there was always something unexplained in Bloom's theory. It is "strength." In Freudian or merely pragmatic, terms, strength would mean merely one's ability to wrestle down the father figure and establish an un-neurotic identity, free of over-determination. And Bloom does indeed use the word in this sense. But "strength" in Bloom's usage overwhelmingly means something else: aesthetic power, the ability to triumph aesthetically. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, when he discusses Tennyson, Arnold, Hopkins, and Rossetti as misreaders of Keats, he decides that only Tennyson has strength: "That Tennyson triumphed in his long, hidden contest with Keats, no one can assert absolutely, but his clear superiority over Arnold, Hopkins and Rossetti is due to his relative victory or at least holding of his own in contrast to their partial defeats. Arnold's elegiac poetry uneasily blends Keatsian style with anti-Romantic sentiment, while Hopkins' strained intensities and convolutions of diction and Rossetti's densely inlaid art are also at variance with the burdens they seek to alleviate in their own poetic selves."

Note here that Bloom is simply asserting that Tennyson is a better poet than the others, while not admitting that he is doing this. At the moment the language is about to become openly evaluative, it becomes Freudian and biographical: "at variance with the burdens they seek to alleviate in their own poetic selves." Bloom cannot admit to it, for if he were just choosing one poet over another for purely aesthetic reasons, then he would have no need of his Freudian system of anxiety and repression. If Tennyson is a better poet than Arnold only because he is less feebly influenced by Keats than Arnold, then how, exactly, is this a new or especially Freudian theory of reading poetry? Poets have always known that the establishment of a voice involves a complex struggle with favored ancestors.

So "strength," in Bloom's vision, has always gone necessarily undefined, the more so as it has become his favorite approbation. Does it mean pragmatic success or aesthetic success? The Bible forces this question acutely on Bloom, and he ducks it. On the one hand, in pragmatic terms, the New Testament is the greatest "strong" misreading of a precursor text ever committed. On the other, it seems to Bloom a work palpably inferior to the Hebrew Bible. How, if this is the case, can it have been so successful? What can it mean to call it a "strong" misreading? Isn't this the equivalent of Arnold displacing Keats in the canon?

The proper solution to this conundrum would be to admit that the Bible confounds the explanatory power of Bloom's theory because aesthetics cede again and again to theology. Whatever reasons people over the centuries have had for worshipping Jesus rather than Yahweh, they have not been primarily aesthetic. Or more precisely, whatever the reasons the early Christians had for persevering with their Jewish heresy, they were not primarily aesthetic. "Strength" will have to mean a hundred things, few of them aesthetic. But this is what Bloom will not confess, because he sees the Bible, and especially Yahweh, only in aesthetic terms, as a great literary creation. So he blusters and throws insults instead. The New Testament may read quite well here and there, but "the power of Christian translators, particularly Jerome and Tyndale, has obscured the relative weakness—aesthetic and cognitive—of the Greek New Testament in its agon with Tanakh." One wonders, here, at the quality of Bloom's New Testament Greek. Can he show us exactly where Jerome and Tyndale applied a little stylistic rouge? Tyndale's favorite New Testament book was Paul's magnificent epistle to the Romans; presumably, when he thus favored it, he was not merely praising his own work.

But just in case this argument does not fly, there are others at hand. In addition, the New Testament is not as ... well, not as *real* as the Old: "Even if Mark were as powerful a writer as the Yahwist, there could be no contest, since Torah (like the Qur'an) *is* God, whereas the entire argument of the Belated Testament is that a man has replaced Scripture." Again, the necessary wobble in that word "contest," which must mean a contest of strength. But of what kind? A theological contest perhaps, except what could that mean, since Christianity is of course premised on such a contest, on a supersession of the old covenant? Yet if this is not a theological contest but only an aesthetic one—in which the belated man-God, Jesus, is not as "strong" a literary character, not as round a figure as the great creation, Yahweh; in which the writers of these books have simply not mustered enough creative power—

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then Bloom undoes his argument by mentioning the Qur'an, a book which may "*be* God," but which, as Bloom himself elsewhere admits, has little of the literary or narratological verve of the Hebrew Bible.

THIS BEING BLOOM, EVERYthing must be worn three or four times at a stretch, like a waif's underwear, so these arguments are repeated and repeated: "John, and Paul before him, took on an impossible precursor and rival, and their apparent victory is merely an illusion. The aesthetic dignity of the Hebrew Bible, and of the Yahwist in particular as its uncanny original, is simply beyond the competitive range of the New Testament as a literary achievement." And if this fails, there is always a combination of simple assertion and camp charm: "In the aesthetic warfare between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, there is just no contest, and if you think otherwise, then bless you."

What a strange parochialism, that imagines everywhere only a literary mode of being! (And what strange literary taste, that gets itself so much more excited by the Book of Mormon than the New Testament.) Why is Bloom so sure that the "warfare" between the two books is aesthetic and not theological? Might not the literary differences between the two Testaments have to do with the conviction of the Gospel writers that they were bearing witness, that they were reporting a historical occurrence, so that creation should give place to report; whereas we know that much of the Pentateuch is a blend of Mesopotamian mythology and Semitic history, "something imagined not recalled," as Lowell has it, much of that history closer to epic narrative than to historical record, and bearing the traces of its long hybridity? Does Bloom really think that Paul and John sat down to write thinking to themselves, "Well, it is time to take on that immense literary rival, the Yahwist"? The curious effect of Bloom's theological blindness is that his book reduces theology to aesthetics and simultaneously inflates aesthetics to theology: there is no greater religion here than the religion of art, and in the warfare of the religion of art Yahweh is just "greater."

But of course theology has *not* altogether disappeared. There is a covert, unconfessed theology behind Bloom's theology of aesthetics. For there is indeed a sense in which he simply does not believe in Christ as he believes in Yahweh. He would murmur that he does not believe in Christ "as a literary creation"; that his disbelief has not been suspended by the Gospels as Genesis and Exodus suspends it. But I suspect that this is not just a literary belief. How is it different, really, from the beliefs of thousands of quite un-Bloomian Jews? Like them, Bloom rightly prefers Yahweh to Christ. For him, Yahweh is God and Jesus is only a man pretending to be God: standard fare. What else can it mean to say that the New Testament is not as successful as the Torah because the Torah "*is* God" whereas the New Testament merely argues that "a man has replaced Scripture"? Isn't this just a way of saying that Jesus is not the Messiah?

BLOOM WILL NOT ADMIT TO THIS kind of actually theological belief, because he is wedded to the sole theology of art, to pondering the Bible only as what he calls "high literature." A theological belief would need theological argument, but Bloom prefers a belief beyond argument, a belief about which one cannot ever say that so-and-so is "mistaken" to hold it: "If Smith was mistaken, then so were they, but I hardly know just what it could mean to say that the Kabbalists or Joseph Smith were mistaken." Instead, Bloom prefers the pictures and branching hypotheses of Gnosticism, a system he never seems to think of as theological, doubtless because it seems to him so boldly fictive or poetic.

Yet the most powerful part of *Jesus and Yahweh*, the moment when the book really comes alive, is when, ironically enough, Bloom is being theological. Near the end, he gives a brief summary of his cherished Gnostic and Kabbalistic beliefs, and then launches a series of anguished laments. Generally, Bloom's Gnosticism has been inert, theologically speaking—he seems to have so little interest in its fundamental raison d'être, which is to explain the large questions of theodicy; but at the end of his book Bloom gives voice to a kind of plangent Gnostic complaint, whereby he asks Yahweh, in effect, why he has abandoned us—and more particularly, why he has abandoned the Jews. Where did God go? Bloom wonders if Yahweh is off in space, nursing his lovelessness. Or perhaps, following Jack Miles, God has deserted us because he has withdrawn into the contradictions of his own character?

In general, Bloom has never shown much awareness that, philosophically speaking, Gnosticism solves nothing—that the positing of a false God or Demiurge is quite obviously not a "solution" to the problem of evil, but merely a dualism that does no more than move the problem, so to speak, somewhere else on the board. But in his closing pages, he seems to face up to the awful pessimism at the heart of Gnosticism. "Does Torah love us?" asks Bloom. "I shrug off Yahweh when, for some moment or other, he affirms his love for the Jewish people. Palpably he doesn't, and *not* because we killed Christ; he did, using the Romans and a few Jewish Quislings as his agents." Perhaps indeed Yahweh has deserted us:

> Rabbi Abba bar Mimel, one of the earliest Amoriam, quotes Yahweh as saying, 'I am named according to my acts.' What were these acts during the twenty ostensibly Christian centuries? Where can we see these acts today? A God who hides himself is one matter, but a Yahweh who dwindles down into an occasional burst of radiance no longer merits the name of Yahweh, which after all primarily must mean being present.

This kind of writing, a blasphemous ambling, will not appeal to all tastes; and there is something comically appropriate in the prospect of a critic who disdains theology and the theological Yahweh of the rabbis so palpably possessed by a kind of ardent blasphemy, which is itself a variety of theology.

In *The American Religion*, Bloom says that as a religious critic he has tried to follow something uttered by his secular deity, William Blake, that "Everything Possible to be Believed is an Image of Truth." One would need such an aphorism to avoid breaking out into derision at the Mormons, the Christian Scientists, and the fundamentalists. It looks like one of Blake's sillier lines, itself an image of untruth; unless, of course, Blake actually meant that everything possible to be doubted is an image of truth—that every doubtful thought contains a truth. Harold Bloom, aloft on his sublime religion of art, has never been much enamored of doubt. The hint of it at the end of his book gives his writing a new, and decidedly belated, energy. ■

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Rochelle Gurstein

Mourning in America

THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING
By Joan Didion
(Alfred A. Knopf, 227 pp., $23.95)

THE BEST DAY THE WORST DAY: LIFE WITH JANE KENYON
By Donald Hall
(Houghton Mifflin, 258 pp., $23)

IT HAS LONG BEEN A SOCIOLOGICAL truism that we live in a world with few meaningful public forms, social customs, or religious ceremonies. Yet it is only when we face such devastating events as the death of a loved one that we learn what such truisms mean in lived experience: at the time of our most desperate need, we find ourselves abandoned to our own devices. It is not only that the bereaved must find their way as if no one before them had ever lost a husband or a wife; those who would comfort them are equally at a loss as to what to say or do. Priests still perform last rites, religious services continue to be conducted at funerals, and even non-observant Jews are loath to give up the custom of "sitting shivah"; but what remains of the old rituals and words of consolation has come to feel increasingly hollow.

Yet it would be wrong to imagine that those who lived in societies with well-established rituals of mourning somehow had an easier time reconciling themselves to their shattered lives. Personal letters from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries occasionally include the shocking news that a grieving husband or wife could not properly recover and has died. Nor does it appear that religious faith necessarily makes that reconciliation any less torturous. Consider the case of C.S. Lewis, one of Christianity's greatest modern defenders, who kept a journal of his spiritual collapse after his wife, Helen Joy Gresham, died following a long and excruciating ordeal with bone cancer.

A Grief Observed was published in 1961, and it has been in print ever since. As one might expect from such a rigorous intellect, Lewis's account of his pain is a sobering one. "Don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion," Lewis declares, "or I shall suspect that you don't understand." His wife's death so completely unhinges him that when he tries to pray for her, he finds, to his "bewilderment and amazement," that he must halt, for he feels "a ghastly sense of unreality, of speaking into a vacuum about a nonentity." That he cannot locate her in either time or space raises the crushing possibility that his faith was strong only so long as it was not tested: "Only a real risk tests the reality of a belief. Apparently the faith—I thought it faith—which enables me to pray for the other dead has seemed strong only because I have never really cared, not desperately, whether they existed or not. Yet I thought I did."

With his faith thus tried, the Christian question of life after death torments Lewis in ways for which he was unprepared. What in his believing state would have been a comforting thought—that their earthly lives together were "the basis for, or prelude to, or earthly appearance of, two unimaginable, supercosmic, eternal somethings"—in his broken state serves only to provoke him, since what he is "mourning for, homesick for, famished for" is precisely "the old life, the jokes, the drinks, the arguments, the lovemaking, the tiny, heartbreaking commonplace." And this, he realizes, is impossible. "I know that the thing I want is exactly the thing I can never get."

The rest of his beautiful little volume provides an unflinching record of Lewis's effort to reconcile himself with his loss. It is, above all, an exemplary story of the experience of personal suffering, and the humbling of the will that comes with it. The story moves toward a close with Lewis struggling to put into words a sublime yet terrible paradox: "Lord ... can I meet H. again only if I learn to love you so much that I don't care whether I meet her or not?" Lewis's capacity to formulate this paradox signals a renewal of his faith. And while it gives him the hope of redemption and a future reunion with his wife, it also makes clear why religion does not offer any consolations, for Lewis must accept precisely what he found most unbearable when he was in the throes of grief: that he will never again meet the particular woman he loved with all his being. Indeed, their eternal reunion is possible only if he gives up all such earthly illusions.

Personal accounts like Lewis's that make us experience what grief feels like from the inside—as opposed to scholarly studies that treat it from a distance as a psychological, sociological, or historical phenomenon—are surprisingly rare. (The only exception that comes to my mind, all editorial awkwardness notwithstanding, is Leon Wieseltier's *Kaddish*, which is broadly erudite and generally philosophical at the same time that it is a powerful reflection on the death of his own father.) The scarcity of memoirs of grief raises the possibility that even in our society of manic self-exposure, there still remains a taboo surrounding deaths that are not caused by natural disasters or human violence, the kinds of hideous things we routinely see in photographs in the media. The more commonplace death—a husband dying suddenly of a heart attack as he sits down to dinner, a wife dying slowly and painfully from leukemia after months of grueling treatment—is not a subject that much fascinates us. Or so it seemed until the recent publication of Joan Didion's book about her mourning for her husband, John Gregory Dunne, who died of a heart attack as he sat down to dinner, and Donald Hall's lesser-known book about the loss of his wife, Jane Kenyon, who died slowly and painfully from leukemia after fifteen months of grueling treatment. Suddenly we have two personal accounts of grief in America to ponder.

No doubt the death of a spouse is among the most crushing of experiences. But Didion and Hall each lost more than a spouse, because of the unusual closeness of their respective marriages. We learn from Didion that she and Dunne were almost never apart during their forty years of marriage. As successful writers working at home, their lives revolved seamlessly around each other. They fell into the same daily writing routines, acted as each other's most trusted editor and critic, and at night enjoyed the glamorous social life whose traces found their way into the couple's writings. And

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the same unusually intimate relationship characterized the marriage of Hall and Kenyon, both acclaimed poets. Reading Hall's memoir, we learn that he (twenty years her senior) was her writing teacher at the University of Michigan, and that during their twenty-three years of marriage, most of which were lived at his old family farm in a remote part of New Hampshire, they lovingly devoted themselves to their poetry, to each other, and to their shared passion for nature, gardens, and their menagerie of pets.

LEWIS CHOSE TO PRESENT HIS reactions to his wife's death as casual jottings in a notebook, recording what he is feeling and thinking as he is feeling and thinking. There is an immediacy to this, even though he explains that he is writing to "get a little outside it." Didion began writing her memoir of grief ten months after her husband died, and it is written primarily in the past tense. The first part, which reports on her husband's sudden death and on her daughter's equally sudden life-threatening illness, is the strongest, for it captures both the seeming randomness of life and death and the alienated feel of medicalized mortality. In her account of Dunne's heart attack, Didion's trademark boiled-down style, with its spare use of adjectives and adverbs, its love of facticity, serves her well, as she presents what have become the familiar rituals of death in present-day America—the realization that one's beloved is in serious danger, the call to 911, the emergency workers' attempt to revive the stricken person in one's own living room, the ambulance ride to the hospital, the impersonal conversation with the doctor who happens to be on duty, the awkward ministrations of the social worker, the return of the deceased's belongings.

The static quality of Didion's matter-of-fact style also serves her well in capturing the tedium of the hospital routine as she attends her daughter, who is being treated for a massive brain hemorrhage at UCLA, just months after Dunne died. Didion is especially good about the way educated people nowadays become medical experts in whatever disease afflicts their loved one, and their "absolute belief" that their "management skills" can control just about anything. Didion, too, looks up her daughter's condition on the Internet, studies the highly technical medical literature, challenges the nurses about her daughter's care—all the while ruthlessly observing her every move from the outside. And so when she describes her behavior in her daughter's hospital room, she cannot resist adding, "So profound was the isolation in which I was then operating that it did not immediately occur to me that for the mother of a patient to show up at the hospital wearing blue cotton scrubs could only be viewed as a suspicious violation of boundaries." This same spectatorial habit of mind is at work when Didion reports that the night her husband died she appeared so completely self-possessed that a social worker described her to the attending doctor as "a pretty cool customer." That Didion repeatedly shows herself as others see her is characteristic of her powers of self-distancing. It is both her strength and her weakness. For there is a difference between the distance that provides understanding and the distance that yields irony and an effect of superiority.

Didion's minimal style runs into difficulty when it approaches anything having to do with the interior dimensions of things. Her book is oddly lacking in inwardness. This is especially evident when she tries to represent her state of mind after losing her husband. Like most sophisticated people, Didion did not know what to do. At first she resorted to what she derisively calls "magical thinking," which involved half-conscious omnipotent fantasies that would bring her husband back from the dead, such as not giving away his shoes or refusing to donate his organs because "he would need them if he was to return." She also had more rational strategies of psychic survival: "In time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control." And so Didion reports that she read various poems, novels, Freud and Melanie Klein, *A Grief Observed*, and Philippe Ariès's history of death, all of which were apparently of some use to her, though her tendency is to stick to the surface, a habit that comes from years of writing with the eye of a reporter and screenwriter. Too often Didion is content to quote a line or to name a famous work (and in other contexts, a glamorous place or brand name), letting the shorthand create its own atmosphere for those in the know, instead of reflecting on the meaning of the work or its personal associations.

Didion tells us that she also read the "professional literature" of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers after Freud, but it had little to say to her. She exposes its vacuity by cleverly juxtaposing a jargon-filled excerpt from a professor of psychiatry on "re-grief therapy" with an extended passage from Emily Post on the etiquette of funerals, from 1922. When she turns to the pre-therapeutic old-fashioned arbiter of manners and morals, Didion at last leaves all irony behind: she discovers that Post's "tone of unfailing specificity" and "matter-of-fact wisdom ... spoke to me directly." Indeed, she devotes more space to Post's instructions on how to dress, where to sit, and what to eat before, during, and after the funeral than to any other single writer. Here Didion captures, perhaps even better than Lewis, the extreme helplessness that is characteristic of modern grief. That she is reading Emily Post on the Internet only intensifies this impression, as it is hard to imagine an image more emblematic of our resourceless times than that of a desolate widow poring over the words of an outdated etiquette manual on the flat, glowing screen of a computer monitor.

DIDION'S MEMOIR OF HER year of mourning is largely a story of her growing self-awareness of the futility of attempting to control events that are beyond any mortal's control. Although there are moments when she tries to reckon with her feelings of powerlessness, eventually realizing there was nothing she could have done to save her husband, her constant need to detect, and to expunge, all signs of self-pity—for her, the ultimate vice—means that even her book's occasional inward moments have an emotionally detached feel. In this respect, Donald Hall's memoir, published ten years after his wife's death, could not be more different.

It is, like Didion's, written largely in the past tense, but it is anything but detached. It is not so much a memoir of grief as a blow-by-shattering-blow account of Kenyon's fifteen-month struggle with leukemia, interspersed with chapters describing their life together before she fell ill. That Hall decided to write this book is puzzling, since he published an extraordinary volume of poetry, *Without*, in 1998 that covers much the same ground and achieved, with far

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greater precision and artistry, whatever he could have been hoping to achieve with this prose account. Where the poems were written in the throes of the couple's ordeal, in the memoir time has blunted some (but not all) of Hall's anguish. This is a relief, actually: it would have been too terrible if Hall were still feeling Kenyon's death as intensely as when he poured out his grief a decade earlier.

For that is what he did in those harrowing poems, plunging his whole being deeper and deeper into it. In the first part of the book, Hall makes the reader experience first-hand various episodes of Kenyon's long illness, in all their grim detail; in the second part, he makes the reader feel his desolation through letters he writes to his dead wife about the everyday details of his life without her. Throughout, every detail is heartbreakingly immediate and particular. Indeed, it is the specificity of Hall's writing that makes the best of his poems so devastating to read. And this is just what is missing in Didion's memoir. We get so little about her husband—she provides more about what was in his silver money clip at the time of his death than about what kind of man, husband, or writer he was—that it is hard to feel the dimensions of her loss. In consequence, her account, while admirably unsentimental, is strangely unmoving.

THE PARTICULARITY OF HALL'S poems, which is the source of their emotional power, presents problems of its own: such writing all too easily becomes overly familiar, even intrusive. Grief, because it requires revealing precisely those details of domestic and intimate life that were never seen nor meant to be seen by others, raises vexing questions about which kinds of things can be disclosed in public and which should remain unsaid. In his prose memoir, Hall is intent on providing the truest and fullest account of his life with Kenyon. In the chapters where he describes their life when she was well, his judgment seems to fail him. The ins and outs of their courtship, the purchase of his family homestead, the pets that lived with them, their afternoon naps—to name only a few of the personal matters that he records—seem mainly banal to strangers, even to sympathetic strangers, just as the details of their erotic life (we have here Hall's account of getting a penile device after his diabetes leaves him impotent) tend to make readers feel like voyeurs.

The question of what can appear in public is even more pressing when it comes to descriptions of physical suffering and death. In both his prose memoir and his poetry, Hall reports much about Kenyon's medical treatments. In the memoir, the grim details that fill chapter after chapter often seem gratuitous, because Hall recites them in a rather flat, matter-of-fact, Didion-like manner, devoid of moral or aesthetic significance. In contrast, the best of the poems, which speak of the same medical procedures, employing the same unbeautiful technical terms but with a concentrated intensity and focus, move the reader profoundly. While Jane Kenyon is a particular woman, she is also every suffering person:

> As they killed her bone
> marrow again, she lay on a gurney
> alone in a leaden
> room between machines that
> resembled
> pot-bellied stoves
> which spewed out Total Body
> Irradiation
> for eleven half-hour
> sessions measured over four days.
> It was as if she capped
> the Chernobyl pile with her body.

Hall writes in a disciplined and mindful way; the tautness of his language, self-consciously stripped of all artifice, saves him from lapsing into the habits of poetry and thus keeps him close to the visceral quality of the experience.

This is especially true of the group of poems that tells of Kenyon's last eleven days—from the moment the doctor informs them that the leukemia has returned and nothing can be done, to their conversations about which poems to include in her posthumous volume, and what to do about the funeral arrangements and the obituary, to the final leave-takings of her dearest friends and his gentle care of her at home when she is finally completely helpless. There can be no doubt that these poems testify to the depth and the tenderness of the couple's love for each other; but their very delicacy raises the question of whether anyone should be privy to such intimate moments. How, one wonders, can such intimate moments maintain their character if outsiders are looking over their shoulders?

> Leaving his place beside her,
> where her eyes stared, he told her,
> "I'll put these letters
> in the box." She had not spoken
> for three hours, and now Jane said
> her last words: "O.K."
> At eight that night,
> her eyes open as they stayed
> until she died, brain-stem breathing
> started, he bent to kiss
> her pale cool lips again, and felt them
> one last time gather
> and purse and peck to kiss him back.

I suspect that even the heartbreaking beauty of Hall's rendering of the moment of his wife's death—"A sharp, almost sweet/smell began to rise from her open mouth./He watched her chest go still./With his thumb he closed her round brown eyes"—does not in the end save it from the charge of invading Jane Kenyon's privacy and his own.

MANY OF THESE POEMS ARE, I think, art of considerable magnitude. Still, as I was reading them, I could not escape feeling that Hall was going too far, that there was something wrong in reading such poems and something wrong in publishing them. Especially with the ones that moved me most, I could not help wondering if their intensely personal subject was finally more powerful than their art. Being reduced to tears does not constitute an aesthetic experience. But perhaps that is Hall's achievement: he makes the reader feel the irreconcilable relations between life, death, and art. Poems representing the deathbed should *not* work; but somehow, miraculously, Hall's do.

It is probably not surprising that Lewis, unlike Hall, never dared to speak of his wife's final moments; he published *A Grief Observed* under a pseudonym. Didion, because of her devotion to facts, chose to begin her memoir with her husband's fatal heart attack. She brings the reader into the intimacy of the couple's comfortable Manhattan apartment, quietly setting the scene for the anguished event that is about to happen. Dunne is drinking a Scotch and reading book galleys by the fire as Didion prepares dinner.

> I lit the candles. John asked for a
> second drink before sitting down.
> I gave it to him. We sat down. My
> attention was on mixing the salad.

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John was talking, then he wasn't....
I have no idea which subject
we were on, the Scotch or World
War One, at the instant he stopped
talking.
I only remember looking up. His
left hand was raised and he was
slumped motionless. At first I thought
he was making a failed joke, an
attempt to make the difficulty of the
day seem manageable.
I remember saying *Don't do that.*
When he did not respond my first
thought was that he had started to
eat and choked. I remember trying to
lift him far enough from the back of
the chair to give him the Heimlich.
I remember the sense of his weight as
he fell forward, first against the table,
then to the floor.

Didion's description of her husband's death has nothing sensational or overwrought about it. Indeed, her stringency gives the impression that she is not compromising her husband's dignity in giving the world his final, most vulnerable moments. But is this really so? Most of us have become so used to hearing and reading personal confessions by total strangers that we have lost the capacity to recognize when anyone's privacy, living or dead, is being violated. The distinction between honesty and exhibitionism is increasingly unknown to us.

THE GENRE OF THE GRIEF MEMoir thus entails unusual risks. Hall's greatest poem is "Without," the title poem, which directly follows the one about his wife's last breath. That it is also the most impersonal, the most general, and the most indirect poem of the volume says much about the need for distance, for this poem, more than any of the intimate ones (and more than Didion's pared-down prose), reverberates with a universal aesthetic and moral significance. From the very first line, the reader sees a shift from Kenyon as a person in pain, a person dying, to Hall's own power to create beauty out of loss. In eight stanzas of seven lines each, this sublime lamentation, like no poem I know, presents a deranging vision of what the world looks like bereft of the one who gave it its emotional depth and its aesthetic resonance. Here are the opening three stanzas:

we lived in a small island stone nation
without color under gray clouds
and wind
distant the unlimited ocean acute
lymphoblastic leukemia without
seagulls
or palm trees without vegetation
or animal life only barnacles and lead
colored moss that darkened when
months did

hours days weeks months weeks
days hours
the year endured without punctuation
february without ice winter sleet
snow melted recovered but nothing
without thaw although cold streams
hurtled
no snowdrop or crocus rose no yellow
no red leaves of maple without
october

no spring no summer no autumn
no winter
no rain no peony thunder no
woodthrush
the book was a thousand pages
without commas
without mice oak leaves windstorms
no castles no plazas no flags no
parrots
without carnival or the procession
of relics
intolerable without brackets or colons

The second part of Hall's book consists of letter-poems to Kenyon, and in interviews Hall has explained that writing them was his "only reason for being alive" after Kenyon's death. In these elegiac letters, Hall emerges as a great poet of nature, of transience, of mutability. They show how the timeless natural dimension of existence (the elemental rhythms of seasons and weather) and the temporal human dimension (the everyday rhythms of their two decades surrounded by mountains and ponds and flowers and trees), which once were in harmony, are now, with the death of Kenyon, hopelessly out of sync:

Always the weather,
writing its book of the world,
returns you to me.
Ordinary days were best,
when we worked over poems
in our separate rooms.
I remember watching you gaze
out the January window
into the garden of snow
and ice, your face rapt
as you imagined burgundy lilies.
Your presence in this house
is almost as enormous
and painful as your absence.

In poem after beautiful poem, Hall moves deeper into the heart of the experience of mourning. At any given instant, he finds he must make a reckoning of the world by recalibrating his wife's absence to where she used to be present:

This first October of your death
I sit in my blue chair
looking out at late afternoon's
western light suffusing
its goldenrod yellow over
the barn's unpainted boards—
here where I sat each fall
watching you pull your summer's
garden up.

Where the traditional elegy offered consolation in a vision of rebirth through the elemental cycles of nature, or of resurrection through religious faith, or of immortality through art, Hall's elegy is smaller, more tentative. In one poem, he quotes the words carved into his wife's black granite headstone—

I BELIEVE IN THE MIRACLES
OF ART BUT WHAT
PRODIGY WILL KEEP YOU
SAFE BESIDE ME

—words that Kenyon herself had written for Hall when he had been diagnosed with life-threatening cancer, but then miraculously recovered. Like Lewis's epiphany that, even if he and his wife were to be reunited in some unimaginable eternal realm, the loss of the woman he loved was still irrevocable, Hall also learns that, whatever hope his poetry has for memorializing Kenyon, nothing will bring her back to him. And so his year of mourning closes with a highly ambivalent image of Hall looking at the full, heavy, snowy-white peonies that Kenyon had planted, evoking the traditional promise of rebirth that comes with spring even as the peonies evoke for Hall bittersweet memories of his wife, and thus ends, "Your peonies lean their vast heads westward/as if they might topple. Some topple."

HALL, LIKE LEWIS, HAD A rich tradition to draw upon in his blackest hours of mourning. Religion gave Lewis the

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means to create a profound meditation, just as art gave Hall the means to create beautiful poems. Didion, by contrast, has few such resources to draw on. She apparently puts no hope in the transcendence of art; her book is finally only a journal. As for religion, she makes clear that she "did not believe in the resurrection of the body." She has a more idiosyncratic understanding of religion, in which she interprets the words in the Episcopal liturgy—"as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end"—as "a literal description of the constant changing of the earth, the unending erosion of the shores and mountains, the inexorable shifting of the geological structures that could throw up mountains and islands and could just as reliably take them away." Hall, even in his despair, is so entranced with his natural surroundings—

> The hills collapse together
> in whiteness squared out
> by stone walls that contain
> wavery birches and boulders
> softened into breasts. White
> yards and acres of snowfield
> reflect the full moon,
> and at noontime the sky
> turns its deepest blue
> of the year

—that he cannot resist their familiar beauty or repress his consciousness of wonder. Indeed, he internalizes nature and reproduces his experience of it without resorting to mimetic contrivances:

> I puff as Gussie
> and I walk over packed snow
> at zero, my heart quick
> with joy in the visible world.

DIDION'S IDEA OF NATURE could not be more different. She thinks of it in the scientific terms of geology; and geology, in her words, is "vastly indifferent" to "the works of man," her favorite example being California's earthquakes. In her grief, Didion takes special pleasure in fantasizing how the personal realm of her domestic routines might have converged with the inexorable shifts of the geological realm if she and her husband had drowned together while swimming in a favorite cave in the Palos Verdes Peninsula at the moment a landslide occurred years after they had lived there. There is a kind of apocalyptic power to such an ending, as opposed to the more prosaic one that Didion labels "cardiac arrest at dinner," and she returns to their swimming in the clear waters of the cave at Portuguese Bend in the final paragraph of the book:

> We could have only done this a half dozen times at most during the two years we lived there but it is what I remember. Each time we did it I was afraid of missing the swell, hanging back, timing it wrong. John never was. You had to feel the swell change. You had to go with the change. He told me that.

So Didion's year of mourning, although it did not bring about a spiritual crisis, does produce at least a therapeutic illumination. Throughout the book, her italicized refrain is

> *Life changes fast.*
> *Life changes in the instant.*
> *You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.*

Accepting her husband's death is the terrible change that Didion has understandably been resisting, and in her suffering she realizes that she has never been very amenable to change and finally surrenders her illusion of control. Her husband's words keep repeating to her:

> *Why do you always have to be right.*
> *Why do you always have to have the last word.*
> *For once in your life just let it go.*

Didion's story, then, has reverberations with Lewis's, in that hers, too, reveals how the will is humbled through the experience of suffering. And so by the end of her story she is prepared to accept her husband's words: "You had to go with the change." Given Didion's resourcelessness, which is endemic to this pragmatic and therapeutic age, she has no choice but to find comfort in this rather paltry common wisdom. But, then, without Lewis's spiritual reach or Hall's aesthetic amplitude, is it any wonder that the contemporary experience of grief rarely gets beyond varieties of psychological adjustment? ■

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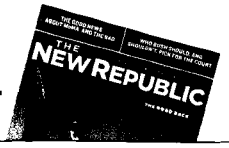

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DENVER DIARIST

Pick Me Up

WHAT THIS FRACTURED and politically uneasy country needs right now is a unified theory of pickup trucks. This thought came to me the other afternoon as I was waiting at a car-rental agency at the Denver airport. I had reserved one of those small cars—what the agencies cheerfully call "economy" class—when I saw, there at the back of the lot, a lustrous Dodge Ram extended cab. I am not often moved by automobiles, but the truck aroused in me an acute, forlorn kind of nostalgia that I had previously observed only in country music singers. When I reached the sales representative, I found myself yodeling, "Do you have any trucks?" The woman upgraded my reservation and directed me to a silver behemoth that was about the size of a Good Humor wagon. I scrambled up into the cab, revved the engine, and slipped *The Very Best of Dwight Yoakam* into the CD player.

I WAS IN DENVER TO VISIT RELATIVES, but the wide highways and mountainscapes offered a chance to rediscover my inner trucker. I don't own a truck in New York City, but that's not to say I don't fantasize about it once in a while. I would pilot my one-ton Powerstroke diesel down Houston Street on the Lower East Side, while the neighborhood's Dominicans, Jewish butchers, and hipsters formed a slow-moving parade in my wake. We would be like a post-gentrification army, led into battle by a Super Duty. Parking would be a problem, of course, but there's something else—something cultural—that makes owning a truck in New York feel verboten. In Texas, where I grew up, to buy a truck was to boast of your masculinity—of your connection with your agrarian forefathers. (And one needn't have been vigorously masculine, nor even had agrarian forefathers, to make this work.) In New York, owning a pickup announces that you are an unassimilated rube, more Hank Williams than Williamsburg. The next thing you know, you'll be hanging a Texas flag out your window and importing barbecue from faraway smokehouses.

THIS IS NOT THE FIRST TIME I'VE BEEN truckless. Growing up in Texas, where truck-owning is a ritual of the late teens, I endured the humiliation of driving a gently used Toyota Tercel. It was a rather sad and puny creature in a high school parking lot filled with Ford F-150s and Dodge Ram Heavy Duties. Though my classmates lived in large houses in Fort Worth, they outfitted their trucks as if they spent their days slaving away on a cattle ranch: mud flaps, winches, KC HiLites, lifts, brush guards. To this pornographic display of options, they added personal uniforms of pressed shirts, Wrangler jeans, and boots. Some days, it was as if Larry McMurtry had adapted *Grease*. And yet, despite this almost garish Texasness, no one seemed to have much stomach for doing the hard work of the land. At day's end, the trucks sat silently in large circular drives, the mud flaps unsullied and the winches unwinched. As a display of machismo, it was spectacularly effective. If anybody drove a sports car, I hardly noticed.

THE NOSTALGIC FANTASY OF THE pickup truck isn't limited to Texas high school boys of the late twentieth century. Let me direct you to the 2006 edition of *Road & Track*'s "Truck Buyer's Guide." There, you will find that the dude-ranch rhapsodizing is alive and well. The Ford F-150, the magazine notes, is "capable of handling the chores around the ranch," while the Dodge Dakota Night Runner—the stealth fighter of pickups, apparently—reminds the authors of a "moonshine runner." On television, Toby Keith, the maestro behind such recent hits as "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)" and "Beer for My Horses," became the spokesinger for Ford's line of pickup trucks. A recent commercial found Keith bragging that his frame—heh heh—was bigger than that of Chevy and Dodge owners; in another, a hitchhiking Keith turns down a lift because the truck that stopped isn't a Ford. "We would be hard-pressed to find a more appropriate personality to help us reach our audience," said one Ford marketing manager last May. This is the strange duality of the pickup truck. It must be urbane enough to navigate the boulevards of the New South while, at the same time, dignifying visions of running grandpappy's bathtub gin through the holler with Toby Keith riding shotgun.

THE REAL MYSTERY OF THE PICKUP truck is how it has remained popular in spite of its lack of practicality as a vehicle. As University of North Carolina historian William Ferris notes, today the pickup is really neither countrified nor citified enough. Real farmhands will tell you that the truck's bed doesn't have enough room for serious farmwork. Nor is a truck's cab (at least in its classic, pre-luxury state) comfortable enough for traveling long distances on the highway. The gas mileage is dismal—why the truck hasn't received the same mark of shame as the SUV is anyone's guess, though I suspect it's because Arianna Huffington doesn't know anybody who drives one. For me, the reasons to love the pickup are purely aesthetic. To climb into the cab is to connect oneself to the long-haul truckers. The unused space in the rear bed indicates big loads to haul, big jobs to accomplish. It's an obviously phony idea—a city slicker's fantasy of real work and the mythological American frontier of the Chevy ads where it supposedly takes place. But, somehow, that doesn't make it any less satisfying.

BACK IN COLORADO, I STEERED MY silver Dodge out onto the highway with a satisfying growl. A few miles later, a second pickup—a dented, dust-covered number—suddenly swerved into my lane, causing me to slam on the brakes. When I pulled up alongside it, ready for action, I noticed the driver looked like a mangier version of Merle Haggard—in other words, the kind of guy who is allowed a very *wide* berth. And yet, upon spotting me, he graciously nodded his head. The gesture seemed to communicate both apology and—if I was reading him correctly, beneath the bushy black mustache and wraparound shades—a kind of brotherhood in truckdom. We might be wholly different creatures, he seemed to be thinking, but at least we chose the same ride. Ours was a fleeting friendship, unlikely to be renewed at roadhouses and honky-tonks down the road. But, at that moment, rumbling high above the tarmac, all I could think was, *We both have trucks.* **BRYAN CURTIS**

Bryan Curtis is a columnist for SLATE.

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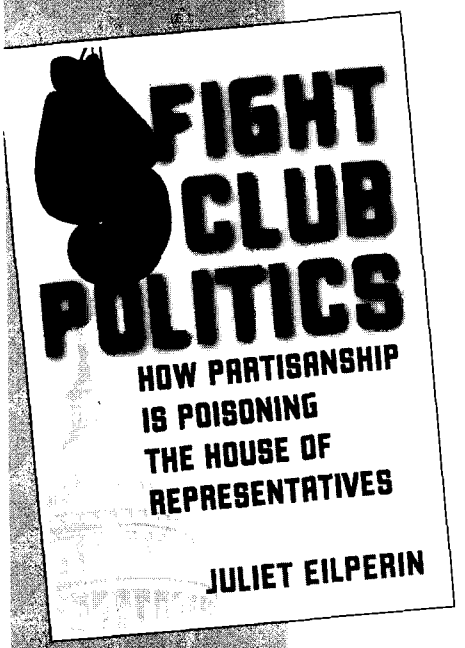

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